

# **The Theory of Decline or the Decline of Theory**

---

**INCLUDING THE DEBATES WITH  
THÉORIE COMMUNISTE**

---

**AUFHEBEN, THÉORIE COMMUNISTE AND CHRIS ARTHUR**

# Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION TO 'THE THEORY OF DECLINE OR THE DECLINE OF THEORY'	6
THE DECADENCE SERIES	
PART 1	25
PART 2	63
PART 3	97
THE DEBATE WITH THÉORIE COMMUNISTE	
PART 1	122
PART 2	164
PART 3	206
APPENDIX - CHRIS ARTHUR VS THÉORIE COMMUNISTE ON ALIENATION	240



# Introduction to 'the theory of decline or the decline of theory'

'The Theory of Decline or the Decline of Theory' is perhaps one of the more well known and popular of Aufheben's early articles that are now long out of print. But what was also particularly significant for us, when deciding what to include in the this volume, was that 'The Theory of Decline or the Decline of Theory' was our first attempt, in an extended 'theoretical' article, to develop many of the positions, which we had only been able to sketch out in the editorial of the first Aufheben, that define where we were coming from.

Of course since this article was written Aufheben has moved on. Indeed, it must be said that even by the time the third instalment had been eventually written and published it had already become clear to us that, despite its merits, that there were serious shortcomings in 'The Theory of Decline or the Decline of Theory'. Rereading this article more than a decade later these shortcomings are all the more glaring. It therefore perhaps behoves us in an introduction such as this to highlight the more salient problems that we now find with this text, and give something of an explanation as to how they arose. But before looking at some of shortcomings of the text itself we shall begin with recalling the political context within which it came to be written.

In our early days we saw ourselves as part of what we then saw as a broadly defined 'ultra-left' milieu. At the time, the Anti-Poll Tax movement had produced something of a revival of the 'ultra-left' in Britain, which had grown up since the 1960s but which had gone into steep decline following the defeat of the miners strike in 1985. After all, the Anti-Poll Tax movement had seemed to open up the possibility of new forms of 'unmediated' class struggle. At the same time, the machinations of the 'left', which culminated with Militants threat on TV to 'name names'

of the Anti-Poll Tax rioters to the police, seemed to both confirm all the old ‘ultra-left’ criticisms of the ‘left-wing of capital’ and re-affirmed the need for a trenchant anti-leftist stance. Despite the reflux that occurred in the aftermath of the Anti-Poll Tax movement, and the dismal failure of the ‘actually existing ultra left’ to get its act together during the Gulf War in 1991<sup>1</sup>, the continued economic crises, the fall of the USSR and the consequent crisis of the left, all seemed provide the opportunity for the development of a revolutionary politics in the longer term.<sup>2</sup>

As a consequence, what we saw as one of our primary tasks at this time was to facilitate the theoretical and political regroupment of the ‘ultra-left’ milieu. To this end, shortly after *Aufheben* #1 came out in the Autumn of 1992, we accepted the invitation offered by Wildcat (UK) to hold a public meeting in London to present the arguments that we had put forward in the article ‘EMUs in the Class War’.<sup>3</sup> It may have been

---

1 See Lessons from the ‘Struggle against the Gulf War’, in *Aufheben* no.1, Autumn 1992.

2 With hindsight this revival appears as little more than a brief Indian summer. A subsequent attempt to regroup the ‘ultra left’ milieu around a regular joint bulletin also ran in the sands after *Aufheben* came under attack from different quarters for attempting, together with Radical Chains, to bridge the river of blood that separated the ultra left from the left since the time of Kronstadt! By the time of the anti-Criminal Justice Bill movement in 1995 it had become clear, at least to most of us in *Aufheben*, that, however intelligent and well read they were individually and however much their writings might have once inspired us years before, collectively and above all practically the ‘actually existing ultra left’ were worse than useless. It was then that we began to recognise that we had to go beyond the theory and practice of the ‘ultra left’.

3 The practical connections that we had established with Wild-

hoped, if perhaps rather naively, that we may be able to avoid sterile debate around abstract or historical issues, which would have inevitably raised well worn ideological divisions within the milieu, by instead promoting discussion around more current and concrete political and economic concerns surrounding the attempts of the European bourgeoisie to create the European Monetary Union, and the relation this had to the current state of class struggle in both Britain and Europe.

It can't be said that the meeting was particularly well attended. However, no doubt in order to repel what they saw as the latest 'modernist grouplet' that had emerged out of the anarchist 'swamp', and which might threaten to undermine their hard-won 'proletarian' theoretical positions, the International Communist Current (ICC) came out in force. The concerted response of the massed ranks of the ICC, which positioned themselves along the front row, to the arguments of 'EMUs in the Class War' not only served to closed down any serious debate at the meeting, but was perhaps all too predictable.

We were told, in no uncertain terms, that capitalism had become decadent in 1914. Not only this, after nearly eighty years of being decadent, capitalism had become so rotten that it had now entered the final phase of decadence – the 'phase of decomposition'. It was therefore quite inconceivable that the bourgeoisie would be able to go beyond the organisational heights of the nation state, which had been achieved during the ascendant era of capitalism in nineteenth century. In the phase of decomposition there could be no economic or political re-composition of the bourgeoisie, only decomposition. Such decomposition, they said, was readily being confirmed by the then current break up of Yugoslavia. Hence, the attempt to create a European Monetary Union was simply

---

cat (UK) during and immediately after the Anti-Poll Tax movement had encouraged us to be far more optimistic about the prospects for a re-groupment of the 'ultra left' than we might otherwise have been.

doomed to failure. There was therefore little point in discussing such matters any further than that.

It must be said that at this time the ICC still retained an inordinate influence over us. Although we certainly disagreed with much of what they said, and had certainly become wary of their dogmatic political practice, we still saw the ICC as providing a fixed reference point with which to navigate by, and admired their unbending defence of ‘revolutionary principles’ against the siren voices of ‘leftism’ and ‘reformism’. However, their dogmatic ‘intervention’ in the meeting prompted us to begin reassessing and clarifying our position regarding the ICC and, in particular, their defining doctrine – their theory of decadence.

Yet, as we were to point out in ‘The Theory of Decline or the Decline of Theory’, the theory of decadence is far from being the sole preserve of the ICC or even, more generally, left-communism. Indeed, a theory of decadence or decline had become the hall-mark of nearly all the various strands of revolutionary Marxism which claimed to defend the Marxist orthodoxy of the Second and Third internationals in the twentieth century against revisionism and reformism. As such, a confrontation with decadence theory seemed to offer an easy way into a critique of ‘orthodox Marxism’ as whole.<sup>4</sup>

But why stop there? On the basis of this ‘critique’ it would be possible, or so it seemed, to assess the merits and limits of all those heterodox currents; such as the *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, the Situationists and the various strands of *Autonomia* and *Autonomist Marxism*, that had arisen in opposition to orthodox Marxism in recent decades, and which had been so inspirational for us. The critique of the theory of decadence, therefore,

---

<sup>4</sup> Or as it was put in the conclusion to ‘The Theory of Decline or the Decline in Theory’, ‘coming to terms with theories of capitalist decline has involved coming to terms with Marxism’, *Aufheben* No.4, Summer 1995, p.34.

seemed to provide the means of ‘coming to terms’ with all the strands of revolutionary Marxism, which had influenced us in one way or another, in one fowl swoop!

As a result, what had originally been envisaged as fitting comfortably within the confines of an extended *Aufheben* article threatened to take on the dimensions of a sizable book. This tension between what the article was originally intended to be, and what it ‘could possibly become’, created considerable stresses and strains, both within the argument of the article itself, and within the *Aufheben* collective. What should have taken only a few months to research and write turned in to what at the time seemed a never ending saga, in which each episode was more excruciating to produce than the one before it.<sup>5</sup> Finally, after more than three years, it became necessary to put the article out of its misery and bring the entire exercise to an abrupt halt.<sup>6</sup>

---

5 In order to resolve the tension between what the article was originally intended to be and ‘what it could possibly become’ (but which might never be if it was not started), we made what proved to be the fateful decision to publish the article in parts as and when it was written, without a fully worked out plan or even a conclusion. This proved to be merely a temporary palliative.

6 To do this a special commission was established to seize all notes in any way related to the article. All the materials seized, apart from a few sheets which were given a special exemption, were then ceremonially burnt (see photos in *Aufheben* No.4, Summer 1995, p.30). There was some protest at these draconian measures from certain quarters. It was argued by some that all that was needed was yet more time to ‘finish’ the article. But as we shall argue the article was fundamentally flawed from the beginning and needed to be torn down and re-written. After all, when you have dug yourself in to a hole the first thing to do is stop digging!



### LACUNAE

So how did the stresses and strains involved in the production of the article show up in the actual text of ‘The Theory of Decline or the Decline of Theory’? We do not propose an exhaustive criticism of the article here. Instead we shall concentrate on a couple of the more salient fissures that were to arise in the text.

The article certainly provides a well researched critical account of the various strands of revolutionary Marxism that emerged in the twentieth century. In doing so it makes what we would still see as important and interesting points. However, once the rather abrupt and unsatisfactory ‘non-conclusion’ is reached it becomes readily apparent that there are serious problems with the overall argument of ‘The Theory of Decline or the Decline of Theory’.

In order to bring the article to a conclusion it had been necessary to answer what, after all, had been ostensibly the basic question – are the theories of decadence true? Has capitalism entered the era of its decline? But no sooner than we dutifully pose this question then it becomes evident that, after having expended tens of thousands of words, we had not gone very far towards answering it. Having made the rather lame excuse that to answer this question meant addressing Marxism in its entirety, all we were then able to do was to make various points that may have contributed towards formulating such an answer if we had eventually managed to get round to answering it. While these points may have been pertinent to answering the question of whether capitalism is in decline, none of them had been developed very far in the main body of the text.

Once the conclusion is read, it is not hard to realise that the argument of the article had somehow gone off at a tangent at some point and had become hopelessly lost. But to see where we became lost, and the further implications this has for the overall coherence of the article, it is necessary to go back to the very beginning.

In the Introduction it was correctly pointed out that any consideration of the theory of decadence raises a number of other related issues. Some of the issues that were mentioned as examples were either tangential or of a rather technical nature, and, as such, could have been dealt with as and when necessary during the course of the article. However, there were other issues mentioned that were far more fundamental and required discussion at the very outset of the article, or at least needed to be thought through before article was begun.

Unfortunately this was not done. Rather than taking care to prepare the foundations of the arguments to be developed in the article, we hared off into an ill considered critical review of the origins and development of twentieth century Marxism, which had an increasingly tenuous connection with the issue of the theory of decadence. The result of this failure to prepare proper foundations for the article was not only that the article eventually lost its way but that the overall coherence of the article became fatally flawed.

As an illustrative examples of the problems with the article, we shall briefly consider the consequences of the failure to think through the two fundamental issues that were at least mentioned in the introduction – that is ‘the periodising of capitalism’ and the ontological question of the relation of subject and object.

### **PERIODISATION**

As anyone who has seriously studied history knows, if we are to apprehend the complex movement of real concrete history it is necessary to employ some form of periodisation. Furthermore, if history is not to be seen as merely a chronology of more or less random events, it is necessary to employ such concepts as tendencies, process and development, and in doing so draw upon such biological metaphors such as birth, growth and decline.

Yet, as anyone who has seriously studied history also knows, periodisation, particularly with regard to grand periodisations of an entire social system, is inherently fraught with problems and dangers. Periodisation is necessarily a process of abstraction, in which what are considered the essential tendencies that unify periods and distinguish them from each other are abstracted from complex and contradictory concrete reality. As a result, on closer inspection, any periodisation is liable to come in contradiction both with discontinuities within the designated periods, and continuities that exist across designated periods. The devil, it might be said, is in the detail. Any theory of periodisation must therefore proceed, through both conceptual and empirical research, to account for such contradictory tendencies and phenomena if it is to reproduce the concrete in thought.

But all this requires effort. It is far easier to imbue the designations of periods, which are often quite abstract or even nominal, with a spurious explanatory power, which then obviates the need for any further theoretical development. As a result, theory remains within the comfort zone of abstract generalities – which purport to explain everything in general, but in fact explain nothing in particular. But a theory that remains abstract inevitably declines in to dogma. The ICC's theory of decadence perhaps being a prime example.

Discussion of such general problems of periodisation, together with a systematic appraisal of other attempts to provide periodisation of the capitalist mode of production in particular, would have provided the foundation for a thorough empirical and conceptual based critique of the theories of capitalist decline.<sup>7</sup> It would also have provided the basis for

---

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the various attempts at periodising the capitalist mode of production, see 'The Global Accumulation of capital and the periodisation of the capitalist state form', by Simon Clarke in *Open Marxism, Volume I*, edited by Bonefeld, Gunn and Psychope-dis, Pluto Press, 1992.

showing how such periodisations can inhibit the development of theory. At least then we could have justified ‘predicate-subject’ reversal of the title.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, we did not pursue a thorough ‘critique’ of decadence theory very far.<sup>9</sup> After all what was the point of taking all the time and trouble

---

8        The unoriginality of this reversal – the theory of decline: the decline of theory – was to be seized upon by the ICC in their response to the article. Taking this as clear give away that we were merely yet another ‘modernist’ grouping who had read too much of the Situationists, they dismissively write:

‘The title of the article in question is ‘Decadence, the theory of decline or the decline of theory’. An attempt at dialectical Hegelian humour, but hardly original. The GCI (Groupe Communiste Internationaliste) launched its attack on the theory some years ago, and their article was called ‘The theory of decadence or the decadence of theory’. More recently, Internationalist Perspective decided to rubbish the ICC’s notion that we have entered into the final phase of decadence, the phase of decomposition. This time the article was wittily entitled the ‘The theory of decomposition or the decomposition of theory’. A case of great minds thinking alike?’ in ‘Polemic with Aufheben: An Attack on Decadence is an attack on Marxism’, *World Revolution* no 168, October 1993. Available at: [http://en.internationalism.org/wr/168\\_polemic\\_with\\_aufheben](http://en.internationalism.org/wr/168_polemic_with_aufheben).

9        ‘Black Wednesday’ in October 1992, which saw the pound evicted from the European Exchange Rate mechanism, seemed to vindicate the ICC’s contention that EMU was doomed to failure. However, with hindsight, ‘Black Wednesday’ also marked the beginning, particularly in the UK, of a new prolonged resurgence in capitalist accumulation that has done more to rebut their theory of decadence than any number of articles we could have written. However, our failure to deal seriously with the general problems of periodisations left

hacking off one branch, when, with a well aimed sweep of the axe, the entire tree of 'orthodox Marxism', decadent branch and all, could be felled at its ontological roots. Unfortunately, as we shall see, the axe was not that well aimed and we had not taken enough time to sharpen the blade.

### ONTOLOGY

As with the issue of periodisation, the 'ontological' issues that were to become fundamental to the entire article were neither discussed in the Introduction nor even properly worked out before hand. Who or what was the subject? What was object? And how they were related? These were questions that were simply left to be worked out as we went along.<sup>10</sup> This failure to at least think through such 'ontological' issues at the very us little prepared to deal with other dubious attempts at the periodisation of capitalism. Indeed, in Part Three we flirted with the fallacious attempt to periodise the capitalist mode of production in terms of the transition of formal to real subsumption of labour under capital. This periodisation had become fashionable in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly amongst Francophone 'ultra-leftists'. This periodisation seemed appealing to us at the time since it seemed to root the history of capitalism in terms of the 'capital-labour' relation rather than in the corresponding 'capital-capital' relations evident in the traditional Marxists periodisation of a transition from laissez-faire to monopoly capitalism. However, what was later to become clear to us was that the attempt to construct a periodisation of capitalism on the basis of some once and for all transition from formal to real subsumption of labour to capital is both misconceived and untenable.

10        Indeed, it is only with the summary of Part One at the beginning of Part Two that it at all becomes clear that what we saw as the fundamental 'ontological' problem with the orthodoxy of the both the second and third internationals was that they were based on an 'objectivist Marxism'.

outset was to lead to both serious ambiguities and fatal lapses that were to undermine the coherence of overall argument of the article and open us up to severe but justifiable criticism.

Let us now consider two of the most glaring manifestations of this failure to adequately resolve the 'ontological' issues at the outset. We shall begin with one of the more obvious errors that we were to make in our discussion of the origins of orthodox Marxism.

### **'AN OBJECTIVIST MARXISM'?**

Of course, with the rise of Hegelian Marxism it has become commonplace to argue that Marx's *Capital*, as its subtitle suggests, was first and foremost an immanent critique of political economy. Through an immanent critique of the reified categories that had been produced and systemised by classical political economy, Marx had sought to show how capital, as the self-expansion of alienated labour, tended to reduce all human agency to its own movement. As a result, capital could be seen to bring about an 'ontological inversion', in which capital itself becomes the subject-object of the current historical epoch.

However, in making an immanent critique of political economy Marx had to necessarily develop the reified categories of political economy. In order to show how capital tends to subsume human agency to its own objective laws of motion, it was necessary to show what these objective laws of motion were and how they operated. As such, by logical necessity, class struggle and human subjectivity were, for the most part, provisionally attenuated and closed off within the pages of *Capital*. As a consequence, if Marx's *Capital* is read as a complete and closed text then it may well lend itself to what we may term an 'objectivist' or 'economistic' reading.

In the prevailing intellectual climate of the late nineteenth century, during which the natural sciences had risen in prestige at the expense of speculative philosophy, it had been very easy for the first generation of Marxists to overlook the form of *Capital* as a critique of political economy.

Instead Capital was usually read in terms of its immediate content as simply a closed and self-sufficient scientific treatise on political economy. It could therefore be said that, just as the natural scientists had discovered the objective laws that governed nature; so Marx could be seen in Capital to have lain bare the essential objective economic laws that ultimately governed capitalist society.

Now it is true that such an 'objectivist' reading of Capital could easily lead to a crude economic determinism and, even at times, to a political fatalism. Certainly many who were acquainted with Marx's Capital in the late nineteenth century drew such conclusions. However, the leading theorists of both the Second and Third Internationals, on the basis of a similar 'objectivist' and 'closed' readings of Capital, opposed what they saw as the economic determinist vulgarisation of Marxism.

The orthodox theorists could readily accept that Marx's Capital was a scientific treatise that revealed the operation of the objective laws that ultimately governed capitalist society. However, they could argue that although a natural scientist had to take a contemplative position so as to act as an objective observer in order to understand the natural laws that governed the natural world, once these natural laws were known they could then be harnessed for human purposes. Likewise, once the economic laws of capitalist society were known then they too could be harnessed so as to bring about the socialist transformation of society. Hence, the positive economic science of Marx's Capital had to be supplemented by, what at an early age would have been termed, the art and science of politics.

Now this answer to the economic determinism of vulgar Marxism betrayed and reinforced an underlying 'ontological dualism' within the orthodox Marxism of the time. As has often been pointed, this dualism - which radically separates from the outset the subject from object - can

be seen to be the source of many of the theoretical and political problems that were to emerge within Marxist orthodoxy.<sup>11</sup>

In short then, if we had thought things through we could have said that an 'objectivist' and closed reading of Capital led, at least in part, to the problems of 'ontological dualism' within orthodox Marxism, which in return led to a dichotomy between political and economic theory. Instead, in our haste to use the stalking horse of the critique of the theory of decline as means to make a critique of 'orthodox Marxism' as a whole, our argument becomes confused and ambiguous with dire consequences.

Now it might be reasonably argued that the theories of capitalist decline were rooted in 'objectivist' readings of Capital that were inherited from the Second International. But this does not mean that 'orthodox Marxism' as whole can simply be reduced to being an 'objectivist Marxism'. However much Marxists of the time may have thought that capitalism was doomed to breakdown due its own internal and objective laws, few thought that this would be a sufficient condition for the achievement of socialism. Socialism could only be brought about through the conscious will, determination and action of party militants, and ultimately the

---

11 Perhaps the clearest example of the political implications that could arise from this 'ontological dualism' can be seen in Lenin's *What is to be Done?* In this work it may be argued that the revolutionary subject is not the proletariat but the professional revolutionaries. Being drawn from mainly from the intelligentsia these revolutionary subjects are assumed to stand apart from the object that is to be transformed – i.e. capitalist society. Once armed with the science of Marxism the professional revolutionaries seek to transform society by harnessing the elemental powers of class struggle by organising and bring consciousness to the working masses from the outside – who, of course, are on their own are deemed only capable of reaching 'trade union consciousness'.



working class. Even the most committed economic determinist would see the working out of capital's objective laws ultimately posing a choice, even if it might be a rather apocalyptic choice, between war or revolution; socialism or barbarism?

Of course, we could not ignore this subjective moment in 'orthodox Marxism'. Indeed, most of the writings of Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg, for example, would have been largely incomprehensible if they were understood to be 'pure objectivists', or even simply economic determinists. Not only this, we were at the time certainly familiar with the criticisms of orthodoxy Marxism for being based on an 'ontological dualism'. After all we had read our Korsch and Lukacs. In fact our account of 'orthodox Marxism' we readily drew on such criticisms of dualism.

Yet our hasty conflation of the critique of decadence with the critique of orthodox Marxism meant that at the crucial points where we had to press home our criticisms our argument faltered. If orthodox Marxism is 'objectivist' how do we account for this subjectivist moment? Rather than attempting to account for this, we end up dismissing the subjective moment as being somehow non-essential. The theories of both the Second and Third Internationals were reduced to their common economic determinism, which was then juxtaposed to their differing essentially non-theoretical political practice.

But the consequence of this is that when we press home our criticism against orthodox Marxism we lapsed into a crude anarchism – the likes of Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg are denounced as having a mere 'contemplative', 'deterministic' and even 'fatalistic' theory. This lapse was eagerly seized upon and duly ridiculed by the ICC in their response to 'The Decline of Theory...'. Not only this but this lapse all also allowed them to construe our argument as simply counter-posing the pure self-determining subjectivism of abstract freedom against the objectivism of

Marxism - permitting them to give us an elementary lesson in the dialectics of freedom and necessity to boot.

As they say:

According to Aufheben, the theory of capitalist decadence (i.e. Marxism) reduces “... revolutionary political activity to a reaction to an inevitable movement.” It “involves an essentially contemplative stance before the objectivity of capitalism ...”. Its consequence is that “socialism is seen not as the free creation of the proletariat but as the natural result of economic development”.

Those unfamiliar with Marxism could quite easily be bamboozled by these arguments, particularly as they tend to regurgitate today’s official media diet which links Marxism with exactly those unappealing qualities. Who but a social democratic or Stalinist monk would choose grim historic necessity over free creativity, or prefer contemplation to activity?

But the alternatives posed by Aufheben are completely false: freedom does not lie in any imaginary independence from necessity, but in the recognition of necessity and action based on this recognition. Freedom and necessity are not mutually exclusive, they are opposites which interpenetrate. How they do so again has to be discovered concretely. Likewise, the relationship between the theory and practice, subject and object, consciousness and being. In framing the problem this way we are only following in the footsteps of Marx and Engels ... and Hegel, who, as Engels said was the first to understand the real relationship between freedom and necessity.<sup>12</sup>

---

12 ‘Polemics with Aufheben: An Attack on Decadence is an attack on Marxism’, *World Revolution* no 168, October 1993. Available at: [http://en.internationalism.org/wr/168\\_polemics\\_with\\_aufheben](http://en.internationalism.org/wr/168_polemics_with_aufheben). The main thrust of ICC’s polemic was to characterise us as academics who were attempting to poison Marxism with a ‘lethal dose of anarchism’. With much of the beginning of the polemic devoted to

## A SUBJECTIVIST MARXISM?

The critical notion of ‘objective Marxism’, which became pivotal in course of the article, was clearly deficient if not problematic. After all if there was an ‘objectivist Marxism’ did not this imply there was some kind of ‘subjective Marxism’ – whatever that might be? And would not such a ‘subjective Marxism’ be just as much one-sided as an ‘objective Marxism’?

Nevertheless, ‘objective Marxism’ did seem to go some way in capturing what we saw as the more salient failings of traditional Marxism: its productivism, its passive and reactive conception of the working class, its conception of communism and so forth. What is more, although we were shy of using the term ‘subjective Marxism’, what appeared as the unifying feature of most of the heterodox currents that arose in opposition to the official Marxism of the USSR and the Stalinist Communist Parties was the centrality of individual and class subjectivity. Indeed, it had been the emphasis on needs and desires, the centrality of the conscious transformative self-activity of the working class, and the demands for the immediate abolition of wage-labour that had most inspired us about the writings of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, the Situationists and the various strands of Autonomia and autonomist Marxism, which we came to consider in the second part of the article.

At the time, we still felt we owed considerable allegiance to such heterodox currents, particular the Autonomists which we saw as giving the ridiculous argument that because we had a ‘pretentious’ German title we must therefore be armchair academics, it was relatively easy for us at the time to dismiss out of hand their entire criticisms. However, with hindsight it must be admitted that at points in their polemic their arguments are quite sharp and perceptive. They certainly were able to deftly exploit the fact that at the time we had yet to critically rethink many of the notions and formulations that we had inherited from both anarchism and the various heterodox currents of Marxism, particularly with regard to ‘revolutionary subjectivity’.

theoretical expression to the highest point in class struggle in recent times. Certainly our criticisms of these currents in Part Two were superficial and rather muted. We did not for instance examine the periodisations that underlay the theories of these currents; nor did we investigate those instances when such currents themselves flipped over into an economicistic, or even technological determinism.

But perhaps more significantly our criticisms were muted because we all too easily accepted the underlying 'ontological' assumptions of such 'subjectivist' currents. Thus, in particular, we uncritically accepted the assumption of an already constituted 'radical proletarian subjectivity' that somehow existed outside and against capital. It was therefore very easy to overlook how such subjectivist currents glossed over the very real problems of understanding how such 'radical proletarian subjectivity' was constituted out of the subjectivity of individual proletarians and through the complex mediations of the relation between capital and labour.

Instead, our overall criticism boiled down to a mere question of emphasis. In correcting the emphasis in 'orthodox Marxism' on 'objectivism', these currents, in the heat of the working class offensive of the 1960s and 1970s, had bent the stick a little too far the other way. It was now, in more sober times, necessary to 'somehow' correct this overcorrection. The failure to develop what this 'somehow' was meant that it was easy for us to be accused of having a position of mere mitigation, in which objectivism had to be brought back in for those times when there was a down turn in class struggle.<sup>13</sup>

---

13 This was one of the more perceptive criticisms put forward by *Théorie Communiste* (TC) in their introduction to their French translation of 'The Theory of Decline or the Decline of Theory' – an English translation of which was reproduced in *Aufheben* no.11, 2003. However, *Théorie Communiste*'s own purported solution to the problem of orthodox Marxism's dichotomy between the subjective

However, it should be said that already by the time Part Two of ‘The Theory of Decline or the Decline of Theory’ was published we were already beginning to move on from the rather confused and ambiguous ‘ontological’ positions of this article, particularly through the development of our critical engagement with Autonomist Marxism.<sup>14</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It must be admitted that ‘The Theory of Decline and the Decline of Theory’ is ultimately flawed both in its conception and in its execution. Certainly if we were to write it again we would go a very different way about doing it, and it would end up being a very different article. Nevertheless, if the number of comments, translations and reprints are anything to go by, ‘The Theory of Decline’ remains one of our more popular articles. Certainly, and the objective does not stand up to any close scrutiny. As becomes evident through an examination of both their adoption of a positivist view of history, with its post hoc determinism in which subjective ideas and actions are reduced to their objective results, and with their schematic and structuralist periodisation of capitalism, in which objective material social relations of a period are assumed to be immediately and unequivocally expressed subjectively, Théorie Communiste’s ‘mutual involvement of the subjective and objective’ merely ends up collapsing the subjective into the objective. As a result, far from overcoming the dichotomies of orthodox Marxism, Théorie Communiste ultimately into a fatalistic objectivism – (albeit, perhaps, an objectivism of the ‘totality’ not the ‘economic’). As such, they effectively reproduce, albeit in a more sophisticated and all-encompassing form, the theoretical and political dead end of economicist vulgar Marxism, which as we have pointed out the leading figures of orthodox Marxism overcame more than a hundred years ago.

14 See introduction to the Autonomist articles in the series at Libcom: <https://libcom.org/library/aufheben-autonomia>

if it is read as a work-in-progress, rather than as a definitive statement, or 'critique', then 'The Theory of Decline' retains considerable merit.

If nothing else 'The Theory of Decline' provides a useful and well documented critical introduction to many of the more important strands of revolutionary Marxism. Furthermore, most of the criticisms and comments it presents we would still say are, in themselves, essentially correct.

'The Theory of Decline and the Decline of Theory' shows us working through our ideas and tentatively coming to terms with Marxist and other revolutionary currents that influenced us. As such it marks an important, and perhaps revealing, milestone in the development of *Aufheben*.

# Part 1

The notion that capitalism must inevitably decline and, by implication, that history is on our side, has been a dominant idea that has shaped much marxist and revolutionary thought, particularly that of Trotskyists and left communists. In the wake of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc it has become more important than ever to challenge such notions of capitalist decline and decadence. In the first part of our critique we examine the development of the various theories of capitalist decline that emerged out of the collapse of the Second International up until the end of the Second World War.

## A] INTRODUCTION

We are subjects faced with the objective reality of capitalism. Capitalism appears as a world out of control - the denial of control over our lives. But it is also a world in crisis. How do we relate to this crisis?

One understanding that has been dominant among critics of capitalism is that capitalist crisis, especially a prolonged and severe crisis such as we are presently in, is evidence that capitalism as an objective system is declining. The meaning of decline is either that it has created the basis of 'socialism' and/or that it is moving by its own contradictions towards a breakdown. Capitalism, it is said, is a world system that was mature in the Nineteenth Century, but has now entered its declining stage. In our view this theory of capitalist decline or of the decadence of capitalism hinders the project of abolishing that system.

It might seem a bad time to critique the theory of decadence. In the face of a widespread disillusion with the revolutionary project and with a lack of a working-class offensive there is an understandable temptation to seek refuge in the idea that capitalism as an objective system is after all past its prime, moribund, heading inexorably towards collapse. If the subjective movement for revolutionary change seems lacking, the severity of the

present world crisis offers itself as evidence that the objective conditions will bring about a change in the prospects for revolution.

In the theory of decline a number of issues are intertwined - crisis, automatic breakdown, the periodising of capitalism into ascendant and decadent phases, the notion of transition and the ontological question of the relation of subject and object. At a general level we might say the theory of decline represents a way of looking at the crises of capitalism that sees them expressing an overall downward movement. A complication in looking at the theory is that it has numerous versions. Among those presenting themselves as revolutionaries the two principal variants of the theory are those of Trotskyism and left-communism which although similar in origin are substantially different in the way they effect their politics.<sup>15</sup> For some left-communists politics is virtually reduced to propagandising the masses with the message of capital's decadence, while for many Trotskyists the theory is often more in the background informing their theory of crisis and organisation if not their agitational work.

Essentially the theory suggests that capitalism as a system emerged, grew to maturity and has now entered its decline. The crises of capitalism are seen as evidence of a more severe underlying condition - the sickness of the capitalist system. Capitalist development brings about steadily increasing socialisation of the productive forces and at a certain point the capitalist forces of production are said to have moved into conflict with the relations of production. The concept of the decline of capitalism is bound up with a theory of the primacy of the productive forces. The driving force of history is seen as the contradiction with the relations of

---

15 A reformist conception that development towards socialism is an inevitable process witnessed in the steady increase in the socialisation of the productive forces and the growth of the welfare state has also been widespread. The emphasis of this article will be on those who see capitalist decline as part of the revolutionary project.



production. It is 'quintessentially' a marxist theory taking its understanding of the basic marxist position from the Preface to the Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy<sup>16</sup>.

For most versions of the theory the change from mature to declining capitalism is said to have occurred at a time around the First World War. The present form of capitalism is then characterised by declining or decaying features. Features identified with this change are the shift from laissez faire to monopoly capitalism, the dominance of finance capital, the increase in state planning, war production and imperialism. Monopoly capitalism indicates the growth of monopolies, cartels and the concentration of capital which has now reached the point of giant multinationals disposing of

---

16        Here Marx writes, "the guiding principle of my studies can be summarised as follows. In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage of development of their material forces of production....At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or - this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms - with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution...No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society...In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society." Preface to the Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy, p. 20-21

more wealth than small countries. At the same time in the phenomenon of finance capital, large amounts of capital are seen to escape linkage to particular labour processes and to move about in search of short term profits. In the increase in state planning the state becomes interpenetrated with the monopolies in various ways such as nationalisation and defence spending - this is capital getting organised. This planning is the state trying to regulate the workings of capitalism in the interests of the big firms/ monopolies. Statification is seen as evidence of decay because it shows the objective socialisation of the economy snarling at the bit of capitalist appropriation; it is seen as capitalism in the age of its decline desperately trying to maintain itself by socialistic methods. The state spending and intervention is seen as a doomed attempt to avert crises which constantly threaten the system. War production is a particularly destructive form of state spending, where large amounts of the economy are seen to be taken up by essentially unproductive expenditure. This is closely related to imperialism which is seen as the characteristic of capitalism in the age of its decline. The 'epoch' is in fact said to be initiated by the division of the world between the great powers who have since fought two world wars to redistribute the world market. Wars and the threat of war are seen as evidence that capitalism's only way of continuing to exist is by destruction, it is suggested that if it can not save itself by other methods capitalism will plunge us into a war.

At the present unrewarding time for revolutionary politics it might then seem desirable to seek support for a revolutionary position in a theory offering an analysis of the objective development of history that shows capitalism on the way out. On the other hand some of the developments that have put pressure on a revolutionary position so making a theory of decline attractive undermine some of the presuppositions of at least some versions of the theory. The crisis of social democracy and literal collapse of the Soviet Union has been presented as a triumph of capitalism and as the

end of history. In the West and East it used to be possible to point to an inexorable advance of socialistic forms as apparently concrete evidence of the movement of history being a progress towards socialism or communism. The notion that socialism represented progress was underpinned by the idea that capitalism had entered a declining or decadent phase. It was said that the socialisation of the productive forces was in sharp contradiction with private appropriation. Now with a move towards privatisation of nationalised concerns in the west, and the privatisation of the ruling class itself in the East, the idea that there is an inevitable movement towards socialism - an idea which has been so dominant on the left for the last 100 years - now stands undermined and the notion that history is on our side no longer seems plausible. With the failure of what was seen as 'actually existing socialism' and the rollback of social democratic forms, the identification of socialism with progress and the evolution of human society is thrown into doubt. It would seem that what has suffered a breakdown is not capitalism but history.

Abandonment of the idea that the historical development of the productive forces is a progress towards socialism and communism has resulted in three main drifts in thought: 1) The abandonment of the project of abolishing capitalism and a turn to reformism of the existing system by the 'new realists', 'market socialists' etc. 2) The post-modern rejection of the notion of a developing totality, and denial of any meaning to history resulting in a celebration of what is, 3) The maintenance of an anti-capitalist perspective but identification of the problem as 'progress' or 'civilisation', this romanticism involves the decision that the idea of historical movement was all wrong and what we really want to do is go back. These directions are not exclusive of course; post-modernist practice, to the extent it exists, is reformist while the anti-progress faction has roots in the post-modern attack on history. In the face of the poverty of these apparent alternatives it is understandable that many revolutionaries

would wish to reaffirm a theory of decadence or decline - it is asserted that communism or socialism is still the necessary next stage of human evolution, that evolutionary course might have suffered a setback but we can still see in the crisis that capitalism is breaking down. However in the face of unsatisfactory drifts in theory it is not the case that the only alternative is to reassert the fundamentals, rather we can and must critically re-examine them.

We can see the theory of decline represented by two main factions (of the left?) - Trotskyism and left-communism. With the hard left-communists the decadence theory is at the forefront of their analysis. Everything that happens is interpreted as evidence that decadence is increasing. This is exemplified in the approach of a group like the International Communist Current (ICC) for whom capitalist crisis has become chronic, 'all the great moments of proletarian struggle have been provoked by capitalist crises'. [pI] The crisis causes the proletariat to act and to become accessible to the 'intervention of revolutionaries'. The task of the revolutionaries is to spread the idea of capitalist decadence and the tasks it puts on the historic agenda. 'The intervention of revolutionaries within their class must first and foremost show how this collapse of the capitalist economy demonstrates more than ever the HISTORIC NECESSITY for the world communist revolution, while at the same time creating the possibility for realizing it.' [p III]<sup>17</sup> The model is one of the objective reality of capitalist decadence, arising from its own dynamic, which makes world communist revolution necessary and possible, with the job of revolutionaries being to take this analysis to the class who will be objectively predisposed to receiving the message due to their experience of the crisis. So far no luck! Still, for the theory's proponents the decadence can only get worse; our time will come.

For the Trots the theory is less up front but it still informs their analysis and practice. In comparison with the purist repetition of the eternal

---

17        ICC pamphlet, *The Decadence of Capitalism*.

decadence line by the left-communist upholders of the theory, the Trots seem positively current in their following of political fashion, but behind this lies a similar position. Despite their willingness to recruit members by connecting to any struggle, Trotskyist parties have the same objectivist model of what capitalism is, and why it will break down. They gather members now and await the deluge when, due to capitalism's collapse, they will have the opportunity to grow and seize state power. The position of orthodox Trotskyism is expressed in the founding statement of the Fourth International in which Trotsky writes:

The economic prerequisite for the proletarian revolution has already in general achieved the highest point of fruition that can be reached under capitalism. Mankind's productive forces stagnate... [p8] The objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only 'ripened'; they have begun to get somewhat rotten. Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole of mankind. The turn is now to the proletariat, i.e., chiefly to its revolutionary vanguard. The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership. [p9]<sup>18</sup>

A significant difference in the theories is that the Trotskyist version historically identified the former Soviet Union as a (politically degenerated) part of the economically progressive movement of history while for the left communists it has exemplified the decadence of the period. Thus the Trotskyist theory of decline, which tended to see the Soviet Union as progressive and proof of the transitional nature of the epoch, has been more bothered by the collapse than the left-communists for whom it was just state capitalism and for whom its fate was just grist to the mill

---

18      The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Forth International (1938), reprinted 1988 by the Workers Revolutionary Party who state that "its message is more relevant than ever".

of the notion of capitalism's permanent crisis. Despite their antipathy to other parts of the 'left wing of capital's' program, it is the general statements by Trotskyists about the decadence of capital that the left commies find themselves in agreement with. In fact the ICC even think that the inadequacies of the Trotskyist theory stem from it not having a proper conception of decadence. The underlying similarity in the theories can be identified in an account of their history. Both the Trots and the left-communists claim the mantle of the heritage of the worker's movements. Both trace their heritage through the Second International, and their argument is whether it is in Lenin and Trotsky or figures such as Pannekoek and Bordiga that the classic marxist tradition is continued after 1917 or some such date. If then we wish to understand and assess the theory of the decline of capitalism, we need to trace its history back to Second International Marxism.

### **B] THE HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT AND ITS POLITICAL IMPORTANCE**

The theory of capitalist decadence first comes to prominence in the Second International. The Erfurt Programme supported by Engels established the theory of the decline and breakdown of capitalism as central to the party's programme:

private property in the means of production has changed... From a motive power of progress it has become a cause of social degradation and bankruptcy. Its downfall is certain. The only question to be answered is: shall the system of private ownership in the means of production be allowed to pull society with itself down into the abyss; or shall society shake off that burden and then, free and strong, resume the path of progress which the evolutionary path prescribes to it ?[p 87] The productive forces that have been generated in capitalist society have become irreconcilable with the very system of property on which it is built. The endeavour to uphold this system of property

renders impossible all further social development, condemns society to stagnation and decay. [p 88] The capitalist social system has run its course; its dissolution is now only a question of time. Irresistible economic forces lead with the certainty of doom to the shipwreck of capitalist production. The erection of a new social order for the existing one is no longer something merely desirable; it has become something inevitable. [p 117] As things stand today capitalist civilisation cannot continue; we must either move forward into socialism or into barbarism. [p 118] the history of mankind is determined not by ideas, but by an economic development which progresses irresistibly, obedient to certain underlying laws and not to anyone's wishes or whims. [p119]<sup>19</sup>

As well as this insistence on the inevitable collapse of capitalism by its inner contradictions, the Erfurt Programme also contained eminently reformist goals and tactics and it was these that dominated the Second International whose practice became to build a set of socialist institutions and work through parliament. In this program we see the recurrent themes of the theory of capitalism's decadence: the identification of the revolutionary project with the evolutionary progress of society; the ascription of primacy to the economic laws of development of capital; and the reduction of revolutionary political activity to a reaction to that inevitable movement. Though it is insisted there is a need for political activity, it is seen to be at the service of an objective development. Socialism is seen not as the free creation of the proletariat but as the natural result of economic developments which the proletariat becomes heir to. It is this conception shared by those who present themselves as heirs of the 'classical marxist tradition' and thus the Second International that we

<sup>19</sup> Karl Kautsky, *The Class Struggle [Erfurt Program]*, (Norton Company, 1971). The Erfurt program was the official statement of the politics of the Social-Democratic Party from 1891 until after the First World War.

must shake off. The Erfurt Program was not just a compromise between the ‘revolutionary’ position that capitalism was coming to an end and the reformist remainder: this ‘revolutionary’ part had already converted the revolutionary conception of capitalism’s downfall into a mechanistic, economic and fatalistic one.

### THE LEGACY OF MARX

By adopting a theory of capitalist breakdown the Second International identified itself as the ‘marxist’ section of the workers movement. Indeed for most members of the Second International as for most members of Leninist parties today, Marx’s *Capital* was the big unread work that proved the collapse of capitalism and the inevitability of socialism. The substance of the split in the First International is clouded by the personal acrimony between Marx and Bakunin. Following Debord, we can recognise that both Marx and Bakunin then, and the anarchist and the marxist positions since then, represent different strengths and weaknesses of the thought of the historical workers’ movement. Organisationally while Marx failed to recognise the dangers of using the state, Bakunin’s elitist conception of a hundred revolutionaries pulling the strings of a European revolution was also authoritarian. While ‘marxists’ have developed theory to understand the changes in capitalism but have often failed to ground that theory in revolutionary practice, the anarchists have maintained the truth of the need for revolutionary practice, but have not responded to the historical changes in capitalism to be able to find ways for this need to be realised. While the element of truth in the thought of anarchism must always be present in our critique, if we wish to develop theory we must address the marxist strand of that movement.<sup>20</sup>

20 Our task is to contribute to the revolutionary theory of the proletariat which neither orthodox Marxism nor anarchism represents. But the Marxist strand of the historical worker’s movement has developed the most important ideas we need to address.



The question that arises then, is whether the Second International adopted the valuable point from Marx's side. As well as personal differences the split in the First International between Marx and Bakunin reflected a serious division on how to relate to capitalism. Marx's critique of political economy was a move away from a moral or utopian critique of capitalism. It marked a rejection of the simple view that capitalism is bad and we must overthrow it in favour of the need to understand the movement of capitalism to inform the practice of its overthrow. Marx and Bakunin's reactions to the Paris Commune show this. Bakunin applauded the action and tried to organise his hundred revolutionaries in the immanent revolution; Marx, while identifying the communards as having found the forms through which capitalism can be negated, thought the defeat showed the weakness of the proletariat at that time. What Marx's critique of political economy did was give a theory of capitalist development in which it is recognised that capitalism is a transitory system of class rule that has arisen from a previous class society but which is dynamic in a way beyond any previous system.

The Erfurt Program and the practice of the Second International represented a particular interpretation of the insights of Marx's critique. The theory of the decline of capitalism is an interpretation of the meaning of Marx's insight that capitalism is a transitory system, an interpretation that turns the notion of a particular dynamic of development into a mechanistic and determinist theory of inevitable collapse. If we think that there is a value in Marx's work, a value that most marxists have lost, then what is it? Marx analysed how the system of class rule and class struggle operates through the commodity, wage labour etc. Capitalism is essentially the movement of alienated labour, of the value-form. But that means that the 'objectivity' of capitalism as the movement of alienated labour is always open to rupture or alteration from the subjective side. An irony in the split in the First International is that Bakunin considered

that Marx's 'economics' were fine. He did not recognise that Marx's contribution was not an economics but a critique of economics and thus a critique of the separation of politics and economics as well.<sup>21</sup> As we shall see, the Second International in their adoption of Marx's 'economics' made the same mistake of taking the critique of political economy offered to revolutionaries as an economics rather than as a critique of the social form of capitalist society.

Behind the breakdown theory is a notion of what socialism is: the solution to 'the capitalist anarchy of the market', the freeing of the forces of production from the fettering relations of private capitalist appropriation. Capitalism is seen as an irrational economy and socialism is seen as equivalent to a fully planned economy. The theorists of the movement were convinced that the movement was on their side, focusing on Marx's ideas that the joint stock system "is an abolition of capitalist private system on the basis of the capitalist system itself."<sup>22</sup> They thought the further socialisation of production evidenced in the extension of credit and joint-stock companies into trusts and monopolies was the basis for socialism. At some unspecified date a revolution would occur and the capitalists would lose their tenuous hold on the socialised productive forces which would fall into the hands of the workers who could continue their historic development.

This is an optimistic reading of the lines of capitalist development which gives the agency for social transformation to capital's drives towards centralisation and co-ordination. To base one's theory on how capitalism transforms into socialism on passages such as that above is founded on the belief that Capital volumes I-III gives a complete systematic and scientific account of capitalism and its destiny. It is to see Capital as

---

21 Of course if Bakunin hadn't given Freilgrath his copy of Hegel's *Logic* who then lent it to Marx then Marx might not have arrived at such a total understanding of capitalism!

22 Capital Vol. III, p. 570.

essentially complete when it is not.<sup>23</sup> Engels prepared volumes II and III for publication, in which as in volume I, although there are intimations of capitalism's mortality, there is no finished theory of how capitalism declines and breaks down. Engels himself was tempted towards such a theory by the sustained depression of the 1870's and 80's, though he never finally settled on one. It was this crisis and Engel's speculative position on it that encouraged Kautsky to make capitalist collapse central to the Erfurt programme and it was the replacement of depression by a prolonged boom from the 1890's that then prompted the revisionist debate.

#### REVISIONISM AND ITS FALSE OPPOSITION

The major proponent of revisionism was Bernstein, his opponent at first Kautsky but later and more interestingly Luxemburg. On one level Bernstein was arguing for the party to bring its theory into line with its tactics and to embrace reformism wholeheartedly. However the focus of his argument and the revisionist controversy was his insistence that the conception of economic decline and breakdown included in the Erfurt program had been proved wrong by the end of the long depression and that the changes in capitalism - e.g. the growth of cartels, of world trade and of the credit system - showed it was able to resolve its tendency towards crisis. Bernstein argued that the legacy of Marx was dualistic, on the one hand a 'pure science of Marxist socialism', on the other an 'applied aspect' which included its commitment to revolution. The notion of decline and breakdown and the revolutionary position it implied was, Bernstein argued, scientifically wrong and it, and the dialectical element in Marx that prompted it, should be eliminated. In the heated arguments Bernstein

23        The view that Capital was a complete work providing a full prescription for the end of capitalism was a position adopted by disciples but not by Marx himself. Kautsky once asked Marx when he would produce his completed works. Marx replied "they would first have to be written".

and Kautsky engaged in a battle of statistics on whether the breakdown theory was correct.<sup>24</sup>

The important point about the revisionist debate was that both Kautsky and Bernstein were agreed on tactics - the furious dispute about theory hid a complicity about practice. What Kautsky defended and what Bernstein attacked was a caricature of revolutionary theory - theory become ideology due to its separation from practice. Moreover it was closer to Engel's Marxism than the ideas of Marx. Kautsky gained his credibility from his association with the two old men but his contact was almost exclusively with Engels. Kautsky continued the process started by Engels - in works such as the *Dialectics of Nature* - of losing the subject in a determinist evolutionary view of history.

When revolutionaries like Luxemburg intervened they were supporting a position that already contained the negation of a consistent revolutionary position. Luxemburg's criticism of Bernstein was at a deeper level than Kautsky's in that she recognised the extent to which his reading of Marx had lost its dialectical revolutionary aspect and had reduced it to the level of bourgeois economics. While Kautsky tried to argue that there was no problem of dualism in Marx's *Capital*, that the notion of the collapse of capitalism and the need for revolution was absolutely scientific, Luxemburg saw there was a dualism: 'the dualism of the socialist future and the capitalist present... the dualism of capital and labour, the dualism of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. ... the dualism of the class antagonism writhing inside the social order of capitalism.'<sup>25</sup> In this we can see an attempt to reclaim the revolutionary perspective from the scientism of the Second International. However as she came to develop her own position on the collapse of capitalism a different form of dualism came to

---

24 Kautsky denied Marxism contained a theory of breakdown but he defended one nonetheless.

25 Reform or Revolution, p. 40.

the fore. Her position was irreconcilably split between on the one hand revolutionary commitment and on the other an objectivist theory of capitalist collapse. Her theory of collapse was founded on a rereading of Marx's schemas<sup>26</sup> to show the eventual impossibility of the reproduction of capital when their purpose, although they indicate the precariousness of capitalist reproduction, is to show in what conditions it is possible. Surprisingly for someone who was committed to mass revolutionary action from below, her theory of capitalist crisis, decline and collapse was based entirely at the level of circulation and the market, and thus does not involve the proletariat at all. At the level of the schemas everyone is simply a buyer or a seller of commodities, and the workers can thus not be agents of struggle.

Luxemburg's theory of decline is premised on the postulation that capitalism needs external non-capitalist markets to absorb surplus profit and when these are exhausted its collapse is inevitable. This did not mean she was not committed to political combat; she did not suggest we should wait for the collapse, arguing that the proletariat would and had to make the revolution before that. But her position was nonetheless economic, in that it postulated the collapse of capitalism from purely economic disequilibrium even though it was not economic, in the sense of say the orthodox Second International theory which relied on those economic forces to bring about socialism. Luxemburg was a revolutionary and she participated in the revolution in Germany, but her conception of the capitalist process was wrong, based as it was on a misunderstanding of the role of Marx's schemas. However she thought that the scientific case had to be proven that capitalism could not expand indefinitely and it is

---

26 Marx's schemas of reproduction in Vol.II of Capital identify certain proportions that must exist between the production of means of production and means of subsistence if capitalist reproduction is to take place.

in this imperative we find the key to the vehemence of the ‘breakdown controversy’.

The left of the Second International saw those who denied the bankruptcy of capitalism moving towards reformism and they conceded that such a move was natural for “If the capitalist mode of production can ensure boundless expansion of the productive forces of economic progress it is invincible indeed. The most important objective argument in support of a social theory breaks down! Socialist political action and the ideological import of the proletarian class struggle cease to reflect economic events, and socialism no longer appears an historic necessity.”<sup>27</sup> For those who follow Luxemburg the reason to be revolutionary is because capitalism has an irresolvable crisis due to a purely economic tendency towards breakdown which becomes actualised when its foreign markets are exhausted. Capitalism’s collapse and proletarian revolution are seen as essentially separate, and their connection lying only in the idea that the former makes the latter necessary.

While Luxemburg was absolutely committed to revolutionary action, and unlike Lenin was sure that such action had to be the self-action of the proletariat, she dualistically held that what made that action necessary was the fact that capitalism would otherwise collapse into barbarism. In that she was wrong; capitalism will only collapse through proletarian action. What needed to be argued with Bernstein was not that capitalism cannot resolve its problems by its own forms of planning (although it cannot ever permanently resolve its problems because they are rooted in the class struggle), for that only demands a socialist planned economy. What actually needed arguing was that the debate over whether the problems of capitalism could be resolved within capitalism or only by a socialist planned economy was missing the point. These problems are not our problems. Our problem is that of the alienation of not controlling our

---

<sup>27</sup> Accumulation of Capital, p. 325.

lives and activity. Even if capitalism could resolve its tendency towards crisis, which it cannot do because such a tendency is an expression of class antagonism, it would not answer our problem with it.

But here's the rub. The socialist economy as envisaged by Second International marxists was a solution to capitalism's problems, and as such was state capitalism. The better left social-democrats<sup>28</sup> identified socialism with proletarian self-emancipation, but their underlying conflict with the state capitalist position of both the right and centre of the party became displaced on to a conflict with the revisionists over the question of economic collapse. This is not to say that the SDP and the Second International were simply a state capitalist party. They represented millions of workers real aspirations and it was often workers who had been members of Second International parties that took a lead in communist actions. But ideologically the Second International had state capitalist goals and those who went beyond these such as Luxemburg did so contradictorily. A part of that contradiction is represented in the maintenance of an objectivist theory of decline.

Bernstein attacked Kautsky and the Second International orthodoxy on the inevitability of breakdown and socialist revolution for fatalism and determinism, in favour of social reformism and the abandonment of revolutionary pretensions. But in point of fact the notion of deterministic economic evolution was the perfect counterpart of reformism. The breakdown theory of the Second International implied a fatalistic conception of the end of capitalism, and thus allowed reformism as an alternative to class struggle. The theory of decline/decadence put forward by the revolutionaries was different to that implicitly contained in the Erfurt

---

28        Lenin was not particularly on the left. He was a good Second International Marxist working in Russian conditions who saw Kautsky as a betrayer of the proper social democratic (hence state-capitalist) position.

Program, for in people such as Luxemburg and Lenin the notion of economic collapse gets identified with the end result of a final stage of capitalism - imperialism/monopoly capitalism. In recognising the changes in capitalism they were in a curious way closer to Bernstein than Kautsky; they marked their opposition to his reformist conclusions by emphasising their commitment to the inevitability of breakdown. It was precisely those changes which Bernstein thought showed capital's resolution of any tendency to collapse, which they saw as expressive of it entering the final stage before its collapse.

The political question of reform or revolution gets bound up with a falsely empirical question of decline. For the left Social-democrats it is seen as essential to insist capitalism is in decay - is approaching its collapse. The meaning of 'marxism' is being inscribed as accepting that capitalism is bankrupt and thus that revolutionary action is necessary. Thus they do engage in revolutionary action, but as we have seen, because the focus is on the objective contradictions of the system with revolutionary subjective action a reaction to it, they do not relate to the true necessary prerequisite of the end of capitalism - the concrete development of the revolutionary subject. It seemed to the more revolutionary members of the movement such as Lenin and Luxemburg that a revolutionary position was a position of belief in breakdown while the theory of breakdown had in fact worked to allow a reformist position at the start of the Second International. The point was that the theory of capitalist decline as a theory of capitalism's collapse from its own objective contradictions involves an essentially contemplative stance before the objectivity of capitalism, while the real requirement for revolution is the breaking of that contemplative attitude. The fundamental problem with the revisionist debate in the Second International is that both sides shared an impoverished conception of the economy as simply the production of things when it is also the production and reproduction of relations which naturally involves people's



consciousness of those relations.<sup>29</sup> This sort of economism (seeing an economy of things not social relations) tends towards the notion of the autonomous development of the productive forces of society and the neutrality of technology. With the economy seen in the former way, its development and collapse is a technical and quantitative matter. Because the Second International had this naturalistic idea of the meaning of the economic development of capitalism, they could maintain a belief in capitalism's collapse without any commitment to revolutionary practice. Because the left identify breakdown theory as revolutionary, Lenin could be surprised at how Kautsky, who wrote the Erfurt Program version of that theory, could betray the revolutionary cause. When the left fought against the mainstream's complicity with capital they brought the theory of breakdown with them. Thus the radical social democrats such as Lenin and Luxemburg combine revolutionary practice with a fatalistic theoretical position that has its origins in reformism.

To say that the Second International was guilty of economism, has become a common place. We have to think what it means in order to see whether the Trots and left-communists who might criticise the politics of the Second International have gone beyond its theory. It is our case that they have not, that they retain an impoverished Second Internationalist theory of the capitalist economy and its tendency towards crisis and collapse with political and social struggle promoted by this crisis at the economic level. This fails to grasp that the object we are faced with is the capital-wage labour relation i.e. the social relation of class exploitation that occurs right across capitalist society: the areas of reproduction, production, political, ideological are all intertwined moments of that relation and it is reproduced within the individual him or herself.

#### RADICAL SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

29 See Colletti, 'Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International' in From Rousseau to Lenin.

It was with the radical social democrats such as Luxemburg, Lenin and Bukharin that the full conception of a decadent epoch of capitalism is arrived at - the notion that at a certain stage - usually around 1914 - capitalism switched into its final declining stage. Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital* is one source of the theory of decline but most revolutionaries then and now disagreed with her account.<sup>30</sup> Other left social democrats such as Bukharin and Lenin founded their theory of imperialism and capitalism's decadent stage on Hilferding's *Finance Capital*. In this work Hilferding linked new features of the capitalist economy - the interpenetration of banks and joint-stock companies, the expansion of credit, restriction of competition through cartels and trusts - with expansionist foreign policy by the nation state. Hilferding, while seeing this stage as the decline of capitalism and transition to socialism, did not think capitalism would necessarily collapse or that its tendency towards war would necessarily be realised, and his politics tended towards reformism. The theories of Bukharin and Lenin produced after 1914 saw imperialism and war as the unavoidable policy of finance capital, they identified this form of capitalism as decisively the decline of the system because of the natural progression of finance capital and monopoly capital to imperialist expansion and war whose only further development had to be proletarian revolution.<sup>31</sup>

---

30        Except the ICC.

31        Lenin suggests it is not enough for the proletariat to react subjectively to the war, the war itself must prepare the objective grounds for socialism: "The dialectics of history is such that the war, by extraordinarily expediting the transformation of monopoly capitalism into state-monopoly capitalism, has thereby extraordinarily advanced mankind towards socialism. Imperialist war is the eve of social revolution. And this is not only because the horrors of war give rise to proletarian revolt - no revolt can bring about socialism unless the economic

Lenin's Imperialism, which has become for his followers the crucial text for the modern epoch, defines the imperialist phase of capitalism 'as capitalism in transition, or, more precisely, as moribund capitalism.'<sup>32</sup> For Lenin, in the capitalist planning of the large companies it is 'evident that we have socialisation of production, and not mere "interlocking"; that private economic and private property relations constitute a shell which is no longer suitable for its contents, a shell which must inevitably decay if its removal is artificially delayed; a shell which may remain in a state of decay for a fairly long period, but which will inevitably be removed.'<sup>33</sup> Lenin's text, like Bukharin's Imperialism and World Economy, which was a great influence on it, adopts Hilferding's analysis of the 'final stage of capitalism' - monopolies, finance capital, export of capital, formation of international cartels and trusts, territorial division of the world. But whereas Hilferding thought that these developments, particularly the state planning in this stage of 'organised capitalism', were progressive and would allow a peaceful advance to socialism, Lenin thought they showed that capitalism could not develop progressively any further. The continuity between the reformist theory of the Second International and the 'revolutionary' theory of the Bolsheviks in terms of the conception of socialism as capitalist socialisation of production under workers' control is one of the keys to the failings of the left in the Twentieth Century. Hilferding writes:

---

conditions for socialism are ripe - but because state-monopoly capitalism is a complete material preparation for socialism, the threshold of socialism, a rung on the ladder of history between which and the rung called socialism there are no intermediate rungs." 'Impending Catastrophe and How to Avoid It', Lenin, Collected Works, 25, p. 359.

32 Lenin, Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism (Progress Publishers, 1982), p. 119.

33 Ibid., p. 119-20.

The tendency of finance capital is to establish social control of production, but it is an antagonistic form of socialization, since the control of social production remains vested in an oligarchy. The struggle to dispossess this oligarchy constitutes the ultimate phase of the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat.

The socializing function of finance capital facilitates enormously the task of overcoming capitalism. Once finance capital has brought the most important branches of production under its control, it is enough for society, through its conscious executive organ - the state conquered by the working class - to seize finance capital in order to gain immediate control of these branches of production... taking possession of six large Berlin banks would mean taking possession of the most important spheres of large-scale industry, and would greatly facilitate the initial phases of socialist policy during the transition period, when capitalist accounting might still prove useful<sup>34</sup>

Henryk Grossman, who as we shall see is one of the key theorists of decline, refers to this conception as ‘the dream of a banker aspiring for power over industry through credit... the putchism of Auguste Blanqui translated into economics.’<sup>35</sup> Yet compare this with Lenin to whom Grossman feels nearer:

Capitalism has created an accounting apparatus in the shape of the banks, syndicates, postal service, consumers’ societies, and office employees’ unions. Without big banks socialism would be impossible. The big banks are the “state apparatus” which we need to bring about socialism, and which we take ready-made from capitalism; our task here is merely to lop-off what capitalistically mutilates this excellent

---

34 Hilferding, *Finance Capital*, pp. 367-368.

35 Grossman, *The Law of Accumulation and the Breakdown of the Capitalist System: Being also a Theory of Crises*, p. 52.

apparatus, to make it even bigger, even more democratic, even more comprehensive. Quantity will be transformed into quality. A single State Bank, the biggest of the big.. will be... the skeleton of socialist society.<sup>36</sup>

Whilst Hilferding thinks this take over of finance capital can be done gradually, Lenin thinks it requires revolution but both identify socialism with the taking over of the forms of capitalist planning, organisation and work.

Imperialism as the stage of monopoly and finance capital was, for Lenin, capitalism's decadent stage. Luxemburg, though with a different analysis, had the similar conclusion that collapse was inevitable. In the internecine debates Leninists accused Luxemburg of a fatalism or spontaneism and of not believing in the class struggle. But although Luxemburg and Lenin differed in their analysis of imperialism their conception of capital's end was essentially the same - the development of capitalism heads towards the collapse of the system and it is up to revolutionaries to make it socialism and not barbarism. Neither of these thinkers were against class struggle; for both the idea is that the development of capitalism has reached a crisis point, thus now we need to act.

However, behind the similarity between Lenin and Luxemburg on the notion of capital entering its final stage there lay a considerable difference, in that while Luxemburg had to an extent criticised the statist model of socialist transformation held by Social Democracy, Lenin had not. In the arguments within social democracy following the Bolshevik revolution, Leninism was accused of voluntarism and defended as reasserting class struggle. What it was actually about was Lenin's maintaining of an objectivist position on what socialism is: the development of an objective dialectic within the economy combined with a voluntaristic view that it

---

36 Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?', CW, 26, p. 110.

could be built. He rode the class struggle to get there - or more favourably responded to it and was carried forward by it - but when in power he started from above to develop the economy because that was what he identified socialism with. Lenin and the Bolsheviks made a political break from Second International marxism, specifically from the orthodox stages theory which implied for Russia that there had to be a bourgeois revolution before there could be a proletarian revolution. But this was not a fundamental break from the Second International's economistic theory of the productive forces. Trotsky's theory of the permanent revolution, which the Bolsheviks effectively adopted in 1917, was not premised on a critique of the reified notion of the development of productive forces held by the Second International, but on an insistence on seeing such development at the level of the world market. The prerequisite for socialism was still seen as the development of the productive forces narrowly considered, it was simply seen that in its decadent highest stage capitalism would not provide that development for Russia.<sup>37</sup>

The Bolsheviks accepted that Russia needed its productive forces developed and that such development was identical with capitalist modernisation; they voluntaristically chose to develop them socialistically. The nature of combined and uneven development under imperialism meant that because capitalism was failing to develop itself, the Bolsheviks would have to do so. Of course they expected support from a revolution in Western Europe but in the introduction of Taylorism, capitalist specialists etc. we see that the task which the Bolsheviks identified as socialist was in fact the development of the capitalist economy. These measures were not pushed on them by the pressure of events, they were part of their

---

37 Is there mileage in the Situationist criticism that Trotsky's was a theory of 'limited permanent revolution' while what is needed is a 'generalised theory of permanent revolution'. Situationist International Anthology p. 65.

outlook from the beginning. In the same text from before the October revolution quoted earlier Lenin admits that “we need good organisers of banking and the amalgamation of enterprises” and that it will be necessary to “pay these specialists higher salaries during the transition period.” but don’t worry he states:

We shall place them, however under comprehensive workers’ control and we shall achieve the complete and absolute operation of the rule ‘he who does not work, neither shall he eat.’ We shall not invent the organisational form of the work, but take it ready-made from capitalism - we shall take over the banks, syndicates, the best factories, experimental stations, academies, and so forth; all that we shall have to do is to borrow the best models furnished by the advanced countries.<sup>38</sup>

While Hilferding had seen the role of state planning in the stage of ‘organised capitalism’ as the basis for a peaceful transition to socialism, Lenin was convinced of the need to take power. But he was in agreement that capitalist planning was the prototype for socialist planning. For us revolution is the return of the subject to herself, for Lenin it was development of an object . The defence of Lenin is that socialism was not possible in Russia so he waited for revolution in Germany. But his conception of socialism, like that of the Second International from which he never effectively broke, was state capitalism.

Within the Bolshevik and Second International conception the socialisation of the economy under capitalism was seen as neutral and unproblematically positive, with the anarchy of circulation being seen as the problem to be got rid of. But capitalist socialisation is not neutral; it is capitalist and thus in need of transformation. The Bolshevik measures are a direct product of their adherence to the Second International identification of socialism with planning. The notion of decline and

---

38      Lenin, op. cit.

decay is seen as evolving from the contradiction between the increasing socialisation of the productive forces - the increasing planning and rationality of production versus the anarchy and irrationality involved in capitalist appropriation through the market - the former is good, the latter bad. The solution implied by this way of conceiving the problem with capitalism is to extend planning to the circulation sphere as well, but both these sides are capitalist - the proletariat does not just take over capitalist control of the labour process and add control over consumption, it transforms all areas of life - the social regulation of the labour process is not the same as the capitalist regulation.

The economistic position of Second International marxism shared by the Bolsheviks dominated the worker's movement because it reflected a particular class composition - skilled technical and craft workers who identified with the productive process.<sup>39</sup> The view that socialism is about the development of the productive forces where they are considered as economic is a product of the lack of development of the productive forces considered as social<sup>40</sup>. One could say that at a certain level of development of the productive forces the tendency for a state capitalist/socialist program was dominant and a truly revolutionary communist position harder to develop. The communist project was adopted by many workers but they did not manage to realise it. There is a problem in looking at history with the question whether it was possible for any particular revolution to win. It did not win then. Communism is never possible in the past only from the present to the future. What we can do is look for reasons why the project of communism was not realised then to inform our efforts to

---

39 See Bologna, 'Class Composition and the Theory of the Party at the Origins of the Workers' Councils Movement' in *Telos*, 13, (Fall) 1972.

40 This is why Marx's statement that the greatest productive force is the revolutionary class itself, is so important.



realise it now. What happened was a battle of forces in which the forces of capital increasingly took the form of a state capitalist worker's party. In considering the productive forces as neutral when they are capitalist the Bolsheviks become a capitalist force. In Stalinism the ideology of the productive forces reached new heights of crassness but while it had differences it also had continuity with the ideas of Trotsky and Lenin. The crushing of workers by the German Social Democrats and by the Russian Bolsheviks both expressed the victory of capital through the ideology of state capitalism. This is not to deny that there would be communist development but such a development would be the conscious acts of the freely associated producers and not the 'development of the productive forces', which presumes their separation from the subject.<sup>41</sup> It would not, as the Bolshevik modernisation program did, have the same technical-economic content as capitalist development. Communism is not built from above, it can only be the movement of proletarian self-emancipation.

## THE HERITAGE OF OCTOBER

The two main proponents of the theory of decadence/decline trace their lineage to this period of war and revolution. And of course there were objective factors supporting the theory - the war was catastrophic<sup>42</sup> and it did appear that capitalism was clapped out. Yet the revolution failed.

The Trotskyist form of Leninism has never made a successful break from the Second International conceptions of what constitutes the crisis of capitalism and thus what socialism should be. While Lenin adopted the theory that capitalism had entered its period of decay, he also insisted that no crisis was necessarily final. Trotsky on the other hand does write of

---

41 As Marx remarks in the Grundrisse productive forces and relations are but two sides of the social individual.

42 The word decadent does seem apt for a system that flings millions to their deaths but this would be to slip into a moral use of the term that the proponents of the theory would be the first to reject.

inevitable collapse. His politics after 1917 was dominated by the idea that capitalism was in or approaching a final crisis from which revolution was inevitable. Trotsky's marxism was founded on the theory of the primacy of the productive forces and his understanding of the productive forces was crude and technical, not so very different from Stalin's: "Marxism sets out from the development of technique as the fundamental spring of progress, and constructs the communist program on the dynamic of the productive forces."<sup>43</sup> When still part of the Soviet bureaucracy, Trotsky's mechanistic notion of the productive forces led him to justify militarisation of labour and to accuse workers resisting Taylorism of 'Tolstoyian romanticism'. When in exile it led his criticism of the Soviet Union to focus not on the position of the workers, whom he'd always been willing to shoot, but on its lack of technical development. He states "The strength and stability of regimes are determined in the long run by the relative productivity of their labour. A socialist economy possessing a technique superior to that of capitalism would really be guaranteed in its socialist development for sure - so to speak automatically - a thing which unfortunately it is still impossible to say about the Soviet economy."<sup>44</sup> On the other hand there was something that made Russia an advance on decadent capitalism: "The fundamental evil of the capitalist system is not the extravagance of the possessing classes, but the fact that in order to guarantee its right to extravagance the bourgeoisie maintains its private ownership of the means of production, thus condemning the economic system to anarchy and decay."<sup>45</sup>

The Soviet Union for Trotsky was progressive because although it had a ruling strata living extravagantly, with planning it had gone beyond capitalist irrationality and decay. It was backward because it lacked technical

---

43        Revolution Betrayed, p. 45.

44        Revolution Betrayed, pp. 47-48.

45        Revolution Betrayed, p. 19.

development. The orthodox Trotskyist defence of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers state was premised on the model of economic development which sees state control and planning as progress. Because of the change in the relations of production, or what for Trotsky amounted to the same thing the property relations, the regime was somehow positive.<sup>46</sup> This position was the logical expression of the theory that capitalist socialisation is positive, private appropriation negative, thus that if one gets rid of private appropriation - private property - you have socialism, or at least the transition to socialism. One can call it socialism but it is state capitalism.

#### THE FALLING RATE OF PROFIT

Trotskyism as a tradition thus betrays its claim to represent what was positive in the revolutionary wave of 1917-21. The importance of the left and council communists is that in their genuine emphasis on proletarian self-emancipation we can identify an important truth of that period against the Leninist representation. However in the wake of the defeat of the proletariat and in their isolation from its struggle, the small groups of left communists began to increasingly base their position on the objective analysis that capitalism was decadent. However there was development. In particular Henryk Grossman offered a meticulously worked out theory of collapse as an alternative to Luxemburg's. Instead of basing the theory of collapse on the exhaustion of non-capitalist markets he founded the theory on the falling rate of profit. Since then, nearly all orthodox marxist theories of crisis have been based on the falling rate of profit. In his

<sup>46</sup> The only Trotskyist grouping to adhere to a state-capitalist theory of the Soviet Union has done the theory much discredit by continuing to uphold a state-capitalist program i.e. a Second International idea of socialism. In part II we will consider whether the revisionism of the neo-Trotskyist SWP (International Socialists) amounts to a sufficient break.

theory, which he argues is Marx's, the tendency for the rate of profit to fall<sup>47</sup> leads to a fall in the relative mass of profit which is finally too small to continue accumulation. In Grossman's account capitalist collapse is a purely economic process, inevitable even if the working class remains a mere cog in capital's development. Grossman tries to preempt criticism:

Because I deliberately confine myself to describing only the economic presuppositions of the breakdown of capitalism in this study, let me dispel any suspicion of 'pure economism' from the start. It is unnecessary to waste paper over the connection between economics and politics; that there is a connection is obvious. However, while Marxists have written extensively on the political revolution, they have neglected to deal theoretically with the economic aspect of the

---

47 Capitalists gain profit by making workers work longer than necessary to replace the value of their wage. The rate of exploitation is then the ratio between the surplus labour workers are forced to perform and the necessary labour, i.e. that which represents their wages. In value terms this can be expressed as surplus value/variable capital (wages) or  $s/v$ . However the workers also maintain the value of the machinery and materials going into production at the same time as they are creating new value. The value of their product can then be divided into a portion representing constant capital such as machinery and materials -  $c$ , an equivalent of their necessary labour -  $v$ , and surplus value -  $s$ . Capital's tendency is to increase the organic composition of capital - increase  $c$  relative to  $v$ . As the capitalists rate of profit is  $s/(c+v)$ , if  $c$  increases the rate of profit falls. This is of course only at the level of a tendency and the interplay with counteracting tendencies (such as an increase in exploitation and devaluation of fixed capital) needs to be considered. At an abstract level this tendency can be said to exist but whether an inexorable process of capitalist decline can be said to develop from it is precisely the point of argument.

question and have failed to appreciate the true content of Marx's theory of breakdown. My sole concern here is to fill in this gap in the marxist tradition.[p 33]<sup>48</sup>

For the objectivist marxist the connection is obvious, the economic and the political are separate, previous writings on the political are adequate and just need backing up with an economic case. The position of the follower of Grossman is thus: 1/ We have an understanding of economics that shows capitalism is declining, heading inexorably towards breakdown. 2/This shows the necessity of a political revolution to introduce a new economic order. The theory of politics has an external relation to the economic understanding of capitalism. Orthodox theories of capitalist crisis accept the reduction of working class activity to an activity of capital. The only action against capital is a political attack on the system which is seen to happen only when the system breaks down. Grossman's theory represents one of the most comprehensive attempts to declare Marx's Capital a complete economics providing the blueprint of capitalist collapse. He insists that "economic Marxism, as it has been bequeathed to us, is neither a fragment nor a torso, but represents in the main a fully elaborated system, that is, one without flaws."<sup>49</sup> This insistence on seeing Marx's Capital as being a complete work providing the proof of capitalism's decay and collapse is an essential feature of the worldview of the objectivist marxists. It means that the connection between politics and economics is obviously an external one. This is wrong; the connection is internal but to grasp this requires the recognition that Capital is incomplete and that the completion of its project requires an understanding of the political

48 The Law of Accumulation and Breakdown of the Capitalist System: Being also a Theory of Crises.

49 H. Grossman, 'Die Änderung des Ursprunglichen Aufbauplans des Marxschen 'Kapitals' und ihre Ursachen' quoted in Rubel on Karl Marx, p. 151.

economy of the working class not just that of capital. But Grossman has categorically denied the possibility of this by his insistence that Capital is essentially a complete work.

#### PANNEKOEK

While left-communists maintained the classical general identification of decadence with the imperialist stage of capitalism, Grossman's more abstract theory rooted in the falling rate of profit tendency in Capital was enthusiastically adopted by many council communists, most prominently Mattick. Against this trend Pannekoek made an important critique. In *The Theory of the Collapse of Capitalism*, Pannekoek, apart from showing how Grossman distorts Marx by selective quotation, develops some arguments that point beyond objectivist marxism. Although in his own way still a believer in the decline of capitalism, Pannekoek starts to make an essential attack on the separation of economics from politics and struggle: "Economics, as the totality of men working and striving to satisfy their subsistence needs, and politics (in its widest sense), as the action and struggle of these men as classes to satisfy their needs, form a single unified domain of law-governed development." Pannekoek thereby insists that the collapse of capitalism is inseparable from the action of the proletariat in a social and political revolution. The dualism involved in seeing the breakdown of capitalism as quite separate from the development of revolutionary subjectivity in the proletariat means that while the working class is seen as necessary to provide the force of the revolution, there is no guarantee that they will be able to create a new order afterwards. Thus "a revolutionary group a party with socialist aims, would have to appear as a new governing power in place of the old in order to introduce some kind of planned economy. The theory of economic catastrophe is thus ready made for intellectuals who recognise the untenable character of capitalism and who want a planned economy to be built by capable economists and

leaders.” Pannekoek also notes something that we see repeated today<sup>50</sup>; the attraction of Grossman’s theory or other such theories of breakdown at times in which there is a lack of revolutionary activity. There is a temptation for those who identify themselves as revolutionaries to:

wish on the stupefied masses a good economic catastrophe so that they finally come out of the slumber and enter into action. The theory according to which capitalism has today entered its final crisis also provides a decisive, and simple, refutation of reformism and all Party programs which give priority to parliamentary work and trade union action - a demonstration of the necessity of revolutionary tactics which is so convenient that it must be greeted sympathetically by revolutionary groups. But the struggle is never so simple or convenient, not even the theoretical struggle for reasons and proofs.[p 80]

But, as Pannekoek continues, opposition to reformist tactics should not be based on a theory of the nature of the epoch but on the practical effects of those tactics. It is not necessary to believe in a final crisis to justify a revolutionary position; capitalism goes from crisis to crisis and the proletariat learns through its struggles. “In this process the destruction of capitalism is achieved. The self-emancipation of the proletariat is the collapse of capitalism.”[p 81, our emphasis] In this attempt to internally link the theory of capitalism’s limits with the movement of the proletariat Pannekoek made an essential move. How to grasp this linkage requires further work.

#### FOURTH INTERNATIONAL AND LEFT-COMMUNISM: FLIPSIDES OF THE OBJECTIVIST COIN

While the small bands of left and council communists mostly adopted a theory of decadence the other claimant to the mantle of continuer of

50      Grossman’s book has just been translated into English with an introduction by an RCP member.

the marxist tradition -Trotskyism - was also making it central to their position. At the foundation of the Fourth International they adopted Trotsky's transitional program *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the 4th International*. In this text the mechanistic conception of the capitalist economy and its decline which had previously justified the position of the bureaucracy, now meant that attempts by Stalinists "to hold back the wheel of history will demonstrate more clearly to the masses that the crisis in mankind's culture, can be resolved only by the Fourth International. [...] The problem of the sections of the Fourth International is to help the proletarian vanguard understand the general character and tempo of our epoch and to fructify in time the struggle of the masses with ever more resolute and militant organisational measures."<sup>51</sup> It might seem churlish to accuse the Trots over something written 50 years ago at a time of depression and impending war when it seemed more reasonable. Moreover, while it is the case that the orthodox trots will hold to every word, in Britain at least, revisionism is the order of the Trotskyist day. However the revisionist SWP and more revisionist RCP still hold to the essential thesis of decline induced crisis and the need for leadership. Trotsky's writings are marked by a rigid dichotomy between the objective conditions that is the state of the economy and the subjective, namely the existence or non-existence of the party. Capitalist crisis is an objective process of the economy and the decadence of capitalism will make that crisis severe enough to create an audience for the party which supplies the working class with the needed subjective element of consciousness and leadership. This conception of the relation between objectivity and subjectivity has to be contested.

What we are saying is not that proponents of decadence or decline do not believe in revolution - they quite manifestly do. (The theory of decline

---

51        *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Forth International*, pp. 11 and 23.



is not a theory of automatic breakdown. Most of its proponents recognise that capital can generally gain temporary escape if the working class let it, but it is a theory which sees an inevitable tendency to breakdown coming from capital's own development and which sees the subjective problem as bringing consciousness into line with the facts). Our criticism is that their theory contemplates the development of capitalism, the practical consequences of which being the fact that the trots move after anything that moves in order to recruit for the final showdown while the left communists stand aloof waiting for the pure example of revolutionary action by the workers. Behind this apparent opposition in ways of relating to struggle, they share a conception of capitalism's collapse which means that they do not learn from the real movement. Although there is a tendency to slip into pronouncements that socialism is inevitable, in general for the decadence theorists it is that socialism will not come inevitably - we should not all go off to the pub - but capitalism will breakdown. This theory can then accompany the Leninist building of an organisation in the present or else, as with Mattick, it may await that moment of collapse when it becomes possible to create a proper revolutionary organisation. The theory of decay and the Crisis is upheld and understood by the party, the proletariat must put itself behind its banner. That is to say 'we understand History, follow our banner'. The theory of decline fits comfortably with the Leninist theory of consciousness, which of course took much from Kautsky who ended his commentary on the Erfurt Program with the prediction that the middle classes would stream "into the Socialist Party and hand in hand with the irresistibly advancing proletariat, follow its banner to victory and triumph."<sup>52</sup>

After the Second World War both the Trotskyists and Left-communists emerged committed to the view that capitalism was decadent and on the edge of collapse. Looking at the period that had just passed the theory

---

52      The Class Struggle, p. 217.

was did not appear too unrealistic - the 1929 crash had been followed by depression through most of the thirties and then by another catastrophic war. Capitalism if not dying had looked pretty ill. Apart from their similar theories of decline both currents claimed to represent the true revolutionary tradition against the Stalinist falsification. Now, while we might say the left and council communists upheld some important truths of the experience of 1917-21 against the Leninist version upheld by the Trots, the objectivist economics and mechanical theory of crisis and collapse which they shared with the Leninists made them incapable of responding to the new situation characterised as it was by the long boom. The revolutionaries of the next period would have to go beyond the positions of the last.

After the Second World war capitalism entered one of its most sustained periods of expansion with growth rates not only greater than the interwar period but even greater than those of the great boom of classical capitalism which had caused the breakdown controversy in the Second International. A crisis ensued within Trotskyism because their guru had categorically taken the onset of the war as confirmation that capitalism was in its death throws and had confidently predicted that the war would herald both the collapse of capitalism and proletarian revolution to set up workers states in the West and to sort out the bureaucratic deformations in the East.<sup>53</sup> Trotsky had closely identified his version of marxism with the perception of capitalist bankruptcy and had written that if capitalism did recover

---

53 "The war will last until it exhausts all the resources of civilization or until it breaks its head on the revolution". Writings 1939-40, p. 151. He was also certain that the Stalinist oligarchy would be overthrown as a result of the war. Trying to deal with this particular contradiction of their master's thought with reality led the American SWP to claim in November 1945 that he was right, only the second World War had not ended!

sustained growth and if the Soviet union did not return to its true path then it would have to be said that “the socialist program , based on the internal contradictions of capitalist society ended as a Utopia.”<sup>54</sup> The tendency of orthodox Trotskyist groups from then on was to deny the facts and constantly preach that crisis was imminent.<sup>55</sup>

The fragments of left-communism were not so limited by identification with one leader’s analysis (moreover many of their theorists were still alive). However, they like the Trots tended to see the post war expansion of capital as a short lived reconstructive boom. Essentially all these representatives of the theory of the post-WW1 proletarian offensive could offer was the basic position that capitalism had not resolved its contradictions - it just appeared to have done so. The basic thesis was right of course - capitalism had not resolved its contradictions - but these contradictions were expressing themselves in ways not grasped by the mechanistic theory of decline and collapse because it did not fully grasp the contradictions. The problem of how to relate to these contradictions in the post-war boom with its pattern in the advanced countries of social democratic politics, Keynesian economics, ‘Fordist’ mass production and mass consumerism, was the problem facing revolutionaries of this period.

When struggles started breaking out the new generation of radicals were antagonistic to the rigid schematic account of capital’s crisis held by the old left. While the left-communist sects accepted this stoically many of

---

54        In Defence of Marxism, p. 9.

55        The SWP likes to claim that with its theory of the permanent arms economy it escaped the imminent crisis problematic of orthodox Trotskyism. In actual fact the Permanent Arms Economy theory was originally introduced as a stopgap to explain the temporary delay to the arrival of the big slump. As the slump continually failed to arrive the SWP then called the Socialist Review Group gradually elaborated the notion into a full scale theory.

the Trot groupings opportunistically followed the concerns of the New Left but only to grab recruits into their organisations who could then be persuaded of the doctrine of economic collapse. There were a number of groups - Socialism or Barbarism, the Situationist International, the autonomists - who attempted to escape the rigidities of the old workers movement and to re-develop revolutionary theory. In the second part of the article we will now look at some of the most important of them as well as at attempts to reassert a revised version of the theory. Some of the questions asked and the answers to which are important for us were: What form was the struggle taking in these new conditions? What was the meaning of communism? How was revolution to be reinvented?

## Part 2

In the second instalment of this, our radical soap-opera of theoretical controversy, we critically examine three important revolutionary currents that went beyond the objectivism of orthodox Marxism - Socialism or Barbarism, the Situationist International, and the Italian autonomist current, as well as attempts to reassert the orthodox line.

The subject of this article is the theory that capitalism is in decline or decay. This characterisation of ‘the epoch’ is associated with the schema that capitalism’s youth was the period of mercantile capitalism that lasted from the end of feudalism until the middle of the nineteenth century, its mature healthy period was the *laissez faire* liberal period in the second half of the nineteenth century, and that its entry into the period of imperialism and monopoly capitalism with its forms of socialisation and planning of production marks the start of the transitional epoch towards post capitalist society.

In Part I we looked at how this idea of the decline or decadence of capitalism has its roots in Second International Marxism and was maintained by the two claimants to the mantle of true continuers of the ‘classical Marxist tradition’ - Trotskyist Leninism and Left or Council communism. Both these traditions claimed to uphold proper Marxism against the reformist Marxists who had ended up defending capitalism. We suggested that a root of the practical failure of the Second International was that theoretically ‘classical Marxism’ had lost the revolutionary aspect of Marx’s critique of political economy and had become an objectivist ideology of the productive forces. The idea of the decline of capitalism upheld by these traditions is the sharpest expression of their failure to break from objectivist Marxism. After the Second World War, while Trotskyism and Left-communism maintained their position despite the counter evidence of the greatest boom in capitalist history, a number of

revolutionaries attempted to develop revolutionary theory for the new conditions, and it is to these currents that we now turn.

We will look at three groups which broke from orthodoxy - Socialism or Barbarism, the Situationist International and the Italian workerist/ autonomist current. We will also consider the re-assertion of the theory of decline and the rejection of decline within objectivism.

## 1. THE BREAK WITH ORTHODOXY

### 1) SOCIALISM OR BARBARISM

Socialism or Barbarism (S or B), whose principle theorist was Castoriadis (aka Cardan or Chaliou), was a small French group that broke from orthodox Trotskyism. It had a considerable influence on later revolutionaries. In Britain the Solidarity group popularised its ideas through pamphlets that still circulate as the most accessible sophisticated critique of Leninism.

Undoubtedly one of the best aspects of S or B was its focus on new forms of workers' autonomous struggle outside their official organisations and against their leaders.<sup>56</sup> S or B, though small, both had a presence in factories and recognised proletarian struggles beyond the point of production.

Part of what allowed S or B to get down to this theorisation and participation in the real forms of workers struggles was a rejection of the reified categories of orthodox Marxism. In "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" Cardan summed up this objectivism as the view that "a society could never disappear until it had exhausted all its possibilities of economic expansion; moreover the 'development of the productive forces' would increase the 'objective contradictions' of capitalist economy. It would produce crises - and these would bring about temporary or permanent collapses of the whole system."<sup>57</sup> Cardan rejects the idea that

56 The Johnson-Forest tendency in America were developing a similar bottom up and non-workerist approach.

57 Modern Capitalism and Revolution, p. 85 (<http://libcom.org/library/modern-capitalism-revolution-paul-cardan>)

the laws of capital simply act upon the capitalists and workers. As he says “In this ‘traditional’ conception the recurrent and deepening crises of the system are determined by the ‘immanent laws’ of the system. Events and crises are really independent of the actions of men and classes. Men cannot modify the operation of these laws. They can only intervene to abolish the system as a whole.”<sup>58</sup> S or B took the view that capitalism had, by state spending and Keynesian demand management, resolved its tendency to crisis leaving only a softened business cycle. Cardan’s attack on orthodox Marxism’s adherence to a Nineteenth century crisis theory in mid-Twentieth century conditions had bite. Conditions had changed - in the post war boom capitalism was managing its crises.

But rather than take this position as undermining the objective basis for revolutionary change S or B affirmed a different way of conceiving the relation of capitalist development and class struggle. As Cardan puts it, the “*real dynamic of capitalist society [is] the dynamic of the class struggle.*” Class struggle is taken by this to mean not just the constantly awaited date of revolution, but the day to day struggle. In this turn by S or B within their theory of capitalism to the everyday reality of class struggle and their attempt to theorise the new movements outside of official channels we see the turn from the perspective of capital to the perspective of the working class. In the mechanical theory of decline and collapse the orthodox Marxists were dominated by capital’s perspective, and such a perspective affects ones politics as well. The rejection of the crisis theory was for S or B the rejection of a concomitant politics for as Cardan points out, the objectivist theory of crisis holds that workers’ own experience of their position in society makes them merely suffer the contradictions of capital without an understanding them. Such an understanding can only come from a ‘theoretical’ knowledge of capital’s economic ‘laws’. Thus for the Marxist theoreticians workers:

---

58        Ibid., p. 48.

Driven forward by their revolt against poverty, but incapable of leading themselves (since their limited experience cannot give them a privileged viewpoint of social reality as a whole) ... can only constitute an infantry at the disposal of a general staff of revolutionary generals. These specialists know (from knowledge to which the workers as such have no access) what it is precisely that does not work in modern society...<sup>59</sup>

In other words the economics involved in the theory of capitalist decadence goes hand in hand with the vanguardist 'consciousness from outside' politics of *What Is To Be Done*.

In the attempt to recreate a revolutionary politics S or B rightly rejected the orthodox conception that the link between objective conditions and subjective revolution was that the crisis would get worse and worse forcing the proletariat to act, with the Party (through its understanding of 'the Crisis') providing leadership. Indeed, in the absence of crisis but with the presence of struggle, the rejection of the traditional model was a help rather than a hindrance. At their best S or B turned to the real process of class struggle, a struggle that was more and more against the very form of capitalist work. As they put it:

The humanity of the wage worker is less and less threatened by an economic misery challenging his very physical existence. It is more and more attacked by the nature and conditions of modern work, by the oppression and alienation the worker undergoes in production. In this field there can be no lasting reform. Employers may raise wages by 3% per annum but they cannot reduce alienation by 3% per annum.<sup>60</sup>

Cardan attacked the view that capitalism, its crises and its decline, was driven by the contradiction of the productive forces and private appropriation. In place of this he argued that in the new phase of

59 Ibid., p. 44.

60 Redefining Revolution, p. 17.



'bureaucratic capitalism' the fundamental division was that between order-givers and order-takers, and the fundamental contradiction was that between the order-givers' need to deny decision-making power to the order-takers and simultaneously to rely on their participation and initiative for the system to function. In place of the notion of crises of capitalism on the economic level Cardan argued that bureaucratic capitalism was subject only to passing crises of the organisation of social life. While the notion of a universal tendency towards bureaucratic capitalism with the crucial distinction being between order-givers and takers seemed useful in identifying the continuity between Eastern and Western systems - in both situations proletarians don't control their lives and are ordered about - such a distinction fails to grasp that what makes capitalism distinct from other class societies is that the order givers have that position only because of their relation to capital, which in its various forms - money, means of production, commodity - is the self expansion of alienated labour. The tendency towards bureaucracy does not replace the laws of capitalism, particularly the fetishism of social relations, rather it expresses them at a higher level. The return of crises in the early seventies showed that what Cardan termed bureaucratic capitalism was not a once and for all transformation of capitalism that abolished economic crises but one particular form of capitalism in which crises tendencies were temporarily being controlled.

Cardan and S or B thought they had superseded Marx in identifying as the 'fundamental contradiction' of capitalism that between capital's need to "pursue its objectives by methods which constantly defeat these same objectives", namely that capitalism must take the participative power away from workers which it actually needs. In actual fact this contradiction, far from being an improvement on Marx, is but one expression of the fundamental ontological inversion Marx recognised at the root of capitalism - the process where people become objects

and their objects - commodities, money, capital - become subject. Of course capital has to rely on our participation and initiative because it has none of its own. Capital's objectivity and subjectivity is our alienated subjectivity. While the ideology that flows from capital's social relations is that we need it - we need money, we need work - the other side is that it is totally dependent on us. S or B's 'fundamental contradiction' does not grasp the full radicality of Marx's critique of alienation. In other words they presented as an innovation what was actually an impoverishment of Marx's critique. We can however understand that their theory was a reaction to a Marxism, whether Stalinist or Trotskyist, that had lost the fundamental importance of Marx's critique of alienation and become an ideology of the productive forces, a capitalist ideology.

Moreover, in not really grasping the root of what was wrong with orthodox Marxism S or B allowed some of its problems to reassert themselves within their own ideology. One could say that, in their identification of the order giver's reliance on workers control of the production process and their councilist wage labour based program,<sup>61</sup> S or B showed the extent to which it remained stuck in the councilist perspective that some of its concrete studies of workers' resistance should have moved it away from - i.e. the perspective of the skilled technical worker. The perspective and struggles that were to bring the post-war boom to a crashing end were those of the mass worker. Whereas the radical perspective of the skilled worker, because s/he understood the whole productive process, tended towards the notion of workers control whereby the capitalist parasite could be dispensed with, the struggles of the Taylorised mass worker tended towards a rejection of the whole alienated labour process - the refusal of work.

---

61 See Workers' Councils and the Economics of Self-Management (<http://libcom.org/library/on-the-content-of-socialism-ii-socialisme-ou-barbarie>)

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Cardan's critique of Marx and Marxism is what it identified in *Capital* as the root of orthodox Marxism's sterility. What's wrong with Marx's *Capital* for Cardan:

is its methodology. Marx's theory of wages and its corollary the theory of the increasing rate of exploitation, begin from a postulate: that the worker is completely 'reified' (reduced to an object) by capitalism.<sup>62</sup> Marx's theory of crises starts from a basically analogous postulate: that men and classes (in this case the capitalist class) can do nothing about the functioning of their economy. Both these postulates are false... Both are necessary for political economy to become a 'science' governed by 'laws' similar to those of genetics or astronomy...It is as objects that both workers and capitalists appear on the pages of *Capital*. ...Marx who discovered and ceaselessly propagated the idea of the crucial role of the class struggle in history, wrote a monumental work ('*Capital*') from which the class struggle is virtually absent!<sup>63</sup>

Cardan has recognised something crucial - the relative marginalisation of class struggle by the very method adopted by Marx in *Capital*. It is this closure of the issue of class struggle and proletarian subjectivity in *Capital* that is the theoretical basis of the objectivist theory of decline. Cardan's reaction is to abandon *Capital*. Similarly Cardan makes a central point of his attack on the tendency of the rate of profit to fall an assertion that Marx believed that the real standard of living and wages of the working class is

---

62 Paradoxically, though this reification is a central part of Cardan's critique of Marx, he himself suggests another problem with Marx is his use of the category of reification when instead modern capitalism should be understood by its 'drive to bureaucratic-hierarchical organisation.' *Revolution Redefined*, p. 6.

63 *Modern Capitalism and Revolution*, p. 43.

constant over time.<sup>64</sup> However this is not the case. *Capital* holds this as a provisional hypothesis - part of the provisional closure of subjectivity in *Capital*. Marx was always aware that what counts as the necessary means of subsistence is a point of struggle between the combatants but in *Capital* he holds it constant expecting to deal with it in the 'Book on Wage Labour',<sup>65</sup> a book that was never written. Thus the value of labour power is dealt with in *Capital* only from the point of view of capital because here Marx was essentially concerned with showing how capitalism was possible. For capitalism to exist it must reify the worker, yet for the worker to exist and to raise the level of her needs she must struggle against this reification. In *Capital* Marx presented the proletariat with an account of how capitalism operated. Such an account is one part of the project of overthrowing capitalism but only a part. The problem with objectivist Marxism is that it has taken *Capital* as complete. Thus it takes the provisional closure as final. Cardan's criticisms grasp an important one-sidedness to *Capital*, and it is the failure to recognise that one-sidedness that leads to the one-sidedness of orthodox Marxism.<sup>66</sup>

However understandable in the context of the post war boom, Cardan and S or B's rejection of the theory of crisis and later of Marx was an overreaction that itself became dogmatic. Cardan and many other S or B

---

64 See the Appendix to Modern Capitalism and Revolution. Part of the rest of this appendix is an argument for a return to Adam Smith's definition of capital.

65 As he writes to Engels 2/4/1858, "Throughout this section [capital in general] wages are invariably assumed to be at their minimum. Movements in wages themselves and the rise or fall of that minimum will be considered under wage labour."

66 For more on this crucial point about how to read Marx, see F.C. Shortall, *The Incomplete Marx* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1994).

theorists like Lyotard and Lefort became academic recuperators. While adopting Cardan's ideas gave revolutionaries an edge on the Leninists in the fifties and sixties, when crisis returned in the seventies those who continued to follow him ironically showed the same dogmatism in denying crisis in the face of its obvious reappearance as the old lefties had in insisting on it during its absence. What one might say is that although the substance of the theory of S or B was wrong, the importance of the group was not their alternative theory of capitalism nor the later ravings of Cardan but rather the way their critique of orthodox Marxism pointed the way for later revolutionaries. S or B pointed towards a rediscovery of the revolutionary spirit in Marx, which is nothing more than an openness to the real movement happening before our eyes.

## II) SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL

One of the most important parts of S or B's analysis was their recognition that workers were struggling against alienation in the factory and outside. The situationists developed the critique of the modern forms of alienation to a new peak, subjecting the capitalist order of things to a total critique. Rather than saying revolution depended on the capitalist crisis reducing the proletariat to absolute poverty the situationists argued that the proletariat would revolt against its materially-enriched poverty. Against the capitalist reality of alienated production and alienated consumption the situationists put forward a notion of what is beyond capitalism<sup>67</sup> as the possibility of every individual participating fully in the continuous, conscious and deliberate transformation of every aspect and moment of our lives. The refusal of the separation of the political and the personal - rejection of the sacrificial politics of the militant and thus the critique of objectivist Marxism in a lived unity of theory and practice, objectivity and subjectivity,

<sup>67</sup> They declined to use the word communism because of its associations. To which one would have to say their alternative of universal self-management has not escaped its own negative connotations.

was one major contribution of the Situationist International(S.I.). In fact one could say that in recognising that revolution had to involve every aspect of our activity and not just the changing of the relations of production the situationists reinvented revolution, which Leninism had wrongly identified with the seizure of the state and continuation of an economically determined society.

While S or B fetishised their rejection of Marx the situationists recovered his revolutionary spirit.<sup>68</sup> The chapter of Debord's *Society of The Spectacle* - 'The Proletariat as Subject and as Representation', is an acute study of the history of the workers' movement. In terms of the question of crisis and decline<sup>69</sup> one of the most important of Debord's points is his criticism of the attempt to ground the proletarian revolution on past changes in modes of production. The discontinuity between the tasks and nature of

---

68 "Are you Marxists? - Just as much as Marx was when he said 'I am not a Marxist.'" Situationist International Anthology.

69 The situationists at times expressed the idea of a general crisis of capitalism, of its reaching of an impasse. At times they expressed the view that modern capitalism was in decline or decomposition. However they did not see this proceeding through an objective logic of the economy, seeing it rather as arising from the subjective refusal of the proletariat to go on as before. To an extent they did ground this on the contradiction of productive forces and relations, but only to the extent that the gap between how capitalism developed them, and what their possible use by the proletariat as it abolished itself could be, had reached an extreme level visible to the subject. This perspective is crucial but it should not be confused with the theory of decline as classically understood where there is a linear evolutionary logic in which it is the productive forces which push to be liberated. The gap between what is possible and what actually exists can only be crossed by a leap.

the bourgeois and proletarian revolutions is crucial. The proletarian aim in revolution is not the wielding of the productive forces more efficiently; the proletariat abolishes their separation and thus abolishes itself as well. The end of capitalism and proletarian revolution is different to all previous changes so we cannot base our revolution on past ones. For a start there is only really one model - the bourgeois revolution - and our revolution must be different in two fundamental ways: the bourgeoisie could build up their power in the economy first, the proletariat cannot; they could use the state, the proletariat cannot.<sup>70</sup>

These points are crucial to an understanding of our task. The bourgeoisie only had to affirm itself in its revolution, the proletariat has to negate itself in its. Of course orthodox Marxists will admit there is something different about the proletarian revolution but they do not think through its implications seriously. In the notion of the decline of capitalism the analogy is made to previous systems in which the old order runs out of steam and the new one has grown ready to take over with a simple capture

---

70 “...the bourgeois revolution is over; the proletarian revolution is a project born on the foundation of the preceding revolution but differing from it qualitatively. By neglecting the originality of the historical role of the bourgeoisie’ one masks the concrete originality of the proletarian project, which can attain nothing unless it carries its own banners and It knows the “immensity of its tasks.” The bourgeoisie came to power because it is the class of the developing economy. The proletariat cannot itself come to power except by becoming the class of consciousness. The growth of productive forces cannot guarantee such power, even by way of the increasing dispossession which it brings about. A Jacobin seizure of power cannot be its instrument. No ideology can help the proletariat disguise its partial goals - general goals, because the proletariat cannot preserve any partial reality which is really its own.” The Society of the Spectacle, Thesis 88.

of political power to accompany economic power. But the only change between modes of production that corresponds to this was the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and the transition from capitalism to socialism/communism must be different because it involves a complete rupture with the whole political/economic order. The state cannot be used in this process because by its nature the state is an organ to impose unity on a society riven economically while the proletarian revolution destroys those divisions.<sup>71</sup>

Part of what led orthodox Marxists to the notion of socialism as something constructed through the use of the state is their bewitchment by Marx's 'Critique of Political Economy', through which they become political economists. Now while Marx's work was not political economy but its critique it had elements that allowed this attenuation of the project. As Debord writes:

The deterministic-scientific facet in Marx's thought was precisely the gap through which the process of 'ideologization' penetrated, during his own lifetime, into the theoretical heritage left to the workers movement. The arrival of the historical subject continues to be postponed, and it is economics, the historical science par excellence, which tends increasingly to guarantee the necessity of its future negation. But what is pushed out of the field of theoretical vision in this manner is revolutionary practice, the only truth of this negation.<sup>72</sup>

What this describes is the loss of the centrality of 'critique' in the assimilation of *Capital* by the 'classical Marxist' tradition. In losing the

---

71 This is not to say the proletariat does not use force to realise its goals and prevent a return to capitalism, just that its force is qualitatively different to state force, which can only be the power of the separate.

72 The Society of the Spectacle, Thesis 84.



importance of this fundamental aspect to Marx's project their work descends into 'Marxist political economy'. As we mentioned in relation to Cardan a theoretical root of objectivist Marxism is the taking of the methodological limitations of *Capital* as final limitations in how to conceive of the move beyond capitalism.

However if the problem of the objectivists was how they took *Capital* as the basis for a linear model of crisis and decline, a problem with the situationists was the extent to which they reacted to this misuse of the Critique of Political Economy by hardly using it at all. For the situationists the critique of political economy becomes summed up as the 'rule of the commodity'. The commodity is understood as a complex social form affecting all areas of life but its complexities are not really addressed. The complexities and mediations of the commodity form - that is the rest of *Capital* - are worth coming to terms with. The commodity is the unity and contradiction of use value and value. The rest of *Capital* is the unfolding of this contradiction at ever higher levels of concreteness. This methodological presentation is possible because the beginning is also a result. The commodity as the beginning of *Capital* is already the result of the capitalist mode of production as a totality, is thus impregnated with surplus value and an expression of class antagonism. In other words the commodity *in a sense* contains the whole of capitalism within it. More than that the commodity expresses the fact that class domination takes the form of domination by quasi-natural things. That the situationist critique could have the power it does is based on the fact that 'the commodity' does sum up the capitalist mode of production in its most immediate social form of appearance. However, particularly with regards to questions like that of crisis, the mediations of that form need to be addressed.

Instead of rejecting *Capital* (or ignoring it) what should be emphasised is its incompleteness, that it is only one part of an overall project of 'capitalism and its overthrow', in which the self-activity of the working class has the

crucial role. What the work of the situationists did, in their re-emphasis on the active role of the subject, was to pose ‘the only truth of this negation’. To emphasise this, against all the scientific Marxists, the Althusserians, the Leninists etc., was right. In a fundamental sense it is always right. Orthodox Marxism, lost in political economy, had lost the real meaning of revolutionary practice. The situationists regained this crucial element in Marx by preferring the earlier writings and first chapter of *Capital*. The ideas of the situationists, which were a theoretical expression of the re-discovery of revolutionary subjectivity by the proletariat, inspired many in ‘68 and since then. They are an essential reference point for us today. But this re-assertion of the subject in theory and in practice did not defeat the enemy at that time - instead it plunged capital into crisis.

In the new period opened up by the proletarian offensive in the late sixties and seventies an understanding of the crisis - including its ‘economic’ dimension - would once again need to be a crucial element of proletarian theory. But the situationists had essentially adopted Socialism or Barbarism’s position that capitalism had resolved its tendency towards economic crisis.<sup>73</sup> Debord’s critique of the bourgeois outlook lying behind the scientific pretensions of the upholders of crisis theory had its truth, but he was wrong to dismiss the notion of crisis completely. In *The Veritable Split*, Debord and Sanguinetti at least admit the return of crisis saying that “Even the old form of the simple *economic crisis*, which the system had succeeded in overcoming... reappears as a possibility of the near future.”<sup>74</sup>

This is better than Cardan’s attempt even in his ‘74 intro to another edition of *Modern Capitalism and Revolution* to deny the substantial reality of the economic crisis.<sup>75</sup> Cardan even accepts the bourgeois belief

---

73 See The Society of the Spectacle, Thesis 82.

74 Debord and Sanguinetti (1972) *The Veritable Split*, Thesis 14, (London: Chronos Publications, 1990).

75 *Modern Capitalism and Revolution*, pp. 10-11.

that it is all an accident caused by the oil shock. But whilst Debord and Sanguinetti's position in admitting the return of crisis is better, we see no attempt by situationists to really come to terms with that return. As *The Veritable Split* opens "The Situationist International imposed itself in a moment of universal history as the thought of *the collapse of a world*; a collapse which has now begun before our eyes."<sup>76</sup> In fact *The Veritable Split* is generally characterised by the notion that capitalism's final crisis has arrived - though that crisis is seen as a revolutionary one.

In *The Veritable Split* the description of the period opened up by May '68 as one of a general crisis is basically correct, however it was also inadequate. Although in the wake of May '68, the Italian Hot Autumn etc. to judge the epoch thus is perhaps forgivable what was needed was a real attempt to come to terms with the crisis. That would have required some grasp of the interaction of the rebelling subject and the 'objective' economy, and that would have required a look at the rest of *Capital*.

## 2. RETURN OF THE OBJECTIVISTS

When economic crisis did return with a vengeance in the early seventies the defenders of the traditional Marxist notion that capitalism was in terminal decline seemed vindicated.<sup>77</sup> As well as thinkers of the old left like Mandel for Trotskyism and Mattick for the council communists new figures like Cugoy, Yaffe and Kidron<sup>78</sup> emerged to champion their

76        *The Veritable Split*, Thesis 1.

77        The ICC even try to explain '68 in terms of the objective crisis beforehand. Despite the overwhelming market lead of the falling rate of profit theory of crisis they continue to push a Luxemburgist thesis. Such brand loyalty really should be applauded.

78        Yaffe and Kidron were both in the International Socialists (forerunner of the SWP) which attempted to distinguish itself with its theory of the Permanent Arms Economy. This essentially tried to account for the whole post-war boom in terms of one factor - arms

---

spending. Behind the innovation of giving arms spending a stabilising role, the theory was essentially orthodox Marxist economics. In the version put forward by Cliff the orthodoxy was underconsumptionism. Military expenditure was given an ability (initially very temporary then as the catastrophe failed to arrive more long lasting) to offset an inevitable crisis of overproduction of capital versus the limited consumption power of the masses. When within Marxist economics there was a shift - the falling rate of profit increasingly took the foreground and underconsumptionism was seen as too crude - Kidron put forward a new version which changed what it was that military spending was meant to mitigate. Rather than unproductive arms spending delaying the point when production of capital outstrips the possibilities for its consumption, that spending was to be seen as a counter-tendency to the tendency of the rate of profit to fall.

The essential point is the theory kept within the assumptions of objectivist Marxist economics. To the extent that it broke from Lenin's analysis of imperialism it was not because of the fact that Lenin gave no place to working class struggle in his analysis. No, for the International Socialists imperialism was just to be the 'last stage but one - another objectivist capital-logic stage. The permanent arms economy was to be the final stage and it, like Lenin's Imperialism, is explained purely in terms of capital. Even in its more developed form the theory was a bit of a hotch potch that had younger guns in the I.S. like Yaffe, who was better versed in the Marxist classics, demanding a return to a fundamentalist falling rate of profit-based theory and leaving to form the RCG in order to develop one. Since then Chris Harman has fleshed out the theory, rounded off a few of its rough edges, and even used Grossman and other decline theorists to back it up. By the seventies anyway the SWP had returned to the fold by agreeing that arms spending could no longer mitigate the tendency towards crisis.

version of the proper Marxist theory of crisis. The political movements connected with such analyses also experienced a growth. There was major disagreement between the theories produced, but what most shared was the perspective that the return of crisis was to be explained solely within the laws of motion of capitalism as explained by Marx in *Capital*. The question was which laws and which crisis tendency was to be emphasised from Marx's scattered references.

#### 1) MANDEL AND MATTICK

Mandel and Mattick, as the father figures, offered influential alternatives. Mattick essentially had kept Grossman's theory of collapse alive through the period of the post-war boom. That is, he offered a theory of capital mechanistically heading towards breakdown based on the rising organic composition of capital and falling rate of profit. His innovation was primarily to analyse how the Keynesian mixed economy deferred crisis through unproductive state expenditure. He argued that though such expenditure could temporarily stop the onset of a crisis this was only because of the general upswing in the economy following the war. The successful manipulation of the business cycle was seen to be dependent on an underlying general healthiness of profits in the private sector. When the underlying decline in the rate of profit had reached a critical point then the increase in demand by the state would no longer promote a return to conditions of accumulation and in fact the state's drain on the private sector would be seen as a part of the problem. His argument then, was that Keynesianism could delay but not prevent the tendency to crisis and collapse inherent to the laws of motion of capital. One of the main advantages of his analysis was to make the theory of crisis basic to the internal contradictions of capitalist production. Mattick thus avoided the fashionable focus on capitalism being undermined by the defeats of imperialism represented by third world revolutions. He thus does not deny the revolutionary potential of the Western working class. However their

class struggle for him would be a spontaneous response to the eventual failure of Keynesianism to prevent the crisis of accumulation. The laws of capital from which crisis was seen to originate and the class struggle were totally separate. What his analysis fundamentally lacked was an analysis of how the class struggle occurred within the period of accumulation. Capitalism's crisis cannot be understood at the abstract level with which Mattick deals with it.

Mandel, the Belgian economist, offered in *Late Capitalism* a multicausal approach. He defines six variables, the interaction of which is supposed to explain capitalist development. Only one of these variables - the rate of exploitation - has any relation to class struggle but even here class struggle is only one among other things that determine this variable.<sup>79</sup> The history of capital is the history of class struggle among other things! The main other thing being the nature of uneven development and thus the revolutionary role of the anti-imperialist countries. He thus describes the history of the capitalist mode of production as driven not by the central antagonism of labour and capital but that between capital and pre-capitalist economic relations. On the one hand he asserts his orthodoxy in claiming that late capitalism is just a continuation of the monopoly/imperialist epoch

---

79 Late Capitalism, p. 40. Interestingly Mattick, who one would have to side with politically against Mandel, argues that Late Capitalism gives too much weight to the class struggle. Mattick introduced Grossman's falling rate of profit based breakdown theory to a new audience. That we find the non-Leninist arguing against the significance of class struggle shows that the problem of objectivism cuts across the Leninist/anti-Leninist divide. In actual fact in Britain the Mattick/Grossman thesis on the nature of the crisis was taken up by a firm Leninist David Yaffe. For Yaffe the class struggle had been absent during the post war boom but the economic determinants had apparently been progressing in its absence.

discerned by Lenin, but he also rehabilitates the theory of long waves of technological development which overlays the epoch of decline giving it periods of upturn and downward movement. The long waves are driven by the agency of technical innovation.

But neither in Mandel's technology driven long waves, nor the rising organic composition driven falling rate of profit thesis, is there is recognition of the extent to which technological innovation is a response to class struggle. Technological determinism of one form or other lies behind objectivist Marxism, which is why the autonomist critique of the objectivist view of technology is so important.<sup>80</sup> It is necessary to relate capitalist accumulation and its crises to the class struggle. The Keynesian/Fordist period had been one in which working class struggle had been expressed largely in steadily rising wages, where the unions as representations of the working class had directed struggle against the tyranny of the labour process into wage claims. By winning steady increases in wages the workers forced capital to increase productivity by intensifying the conditions of work and making ever more labour saving investments, which in turn allowed it to continue to grant the workers rising real wages. In this sense, as we shall see the autonomists argued, working class struggle for a period had become a functional moment in the circuit of capital: a motor of accumulation. But before looking at such analysis it is worth noting that some thinkers in the objectivist camp did break from the decline problematic and attempt a more sophisticated analysis of the post-war period. The Regulation Approach(RA) was open to new ideas like the autonomist analysis of Fordism. However another major influence was structuralism and this kept the RA within the boundaries of objectivism.

## II) THE REGULATION APPROACH

The RA is significant because it attempted to develop theory in relation to the concrete reality of modern capitalism. RA figures such as

---

80 See following section.

Aglietta and Lipietz broke from the orthodox positions on the periods of capitalism and on what capitalist crisis represented. The orthodox periodisation of capitalism was that it grew with mercantile capital, becomes mature with competitive *laissez faire*, and then declines and prepares the conditions for socialism in the period of monopoly and imperialism. The orthodox position on crisis was that in healthy capitalism it was part of a healthy business cycle while in 'the epoch of wars and revolution' it is the evidence of its underlying decline and always quite possibly the terminal breakdown crisis of the system as a whole. In terms of periodisation the RA introduced the notion of 'regimes of accumulation'. That is that the stages of capitalist development are characterised by interdependent institutional structures and patterns of social norms. In terms of crisis the RA suggested that prolonged crisis could represent the structural crises of the institutions of regulation and social norms connected with the regime.

So for example they reinterpreted the division between *laissez faire* and monopoly capitalism as the move from the 'regime of extensive accumulation and competitive regulation' that had existed before the First World War to a regime of intensive accumulation and monopolistic regulation after the Second World War, with the period in between a period of the crisis of one regime and transition to the next. The problem for the orthodox Marxists had been to fit the post-war period into their notion of the 'transitional epoch'. They might do so by calling it a new stage of 'state monopoly capitalism', but their problem was that monopoly should represent the end of capitalism rather than its growth. The RA said that far from being a period of decline the post war period saw the consolidation of a regime of intensive accumulation. This period they saw as characterised by Fordist production methods and mass consumption, the incorporation of consumer goods as a major part of capitalist accumulation, and at the international level American hegemony. At its core the regime is seen as founded on the linkage of rising living standards and rising productivity.



In the light of the RA the '70s are then a new period of structural crisis, but this time of the regime of intensive accumulation. Like Negri and the autonomists the RA sees one part of the crisis as the delinkage of wage increases and productivity and the undermining of the social consensus. The breakdown of productivity increases brings out the fiscal crisis of the state as it remains committed to accumulative increases in public spending while the economic base - real sustained growth - for such a commitment is undermined. At the international level there is also the breakdown of favourable conditions of world trade as American hegemony is undermined. The point in relation to the decline thesis is that the crisis is not a death agony but a severe structural crisis out of which capital could come if it re-establishes a regime of accumulation.

The RA's break with the rigid schema of orthodoxy appears a much more sophisticated and less dogmatic Marxist analysis. However there is no reversal of perspective to see the process from the point of the working class. The RA stays firmly within capital-logic simply layering a mass of complications on to the analysis. So although it might rightly see the crisis as an overall crisis of the social order, the fact that it sees capital not as a battle of subjects but as a process without a subject means that it falls into functionalism. It is assumed that the current restructuring of capitalism will successfully lead to the establishment of a new regime of flexible accumulation - post or neo-Fordism is deemed to be inevitable. Such ideas amount to a new form of technological determinism<sup>81</sup> which, because it asserts the inevitable continuity of capitalism rather than its collapse, is attractive to reformist leftists rather than revolutionaries. So although we might be able to use some of their ideas, the RA is like its structuralist father essentially based on capital logic. Taking the point of

---

81 The attack on the functionalism and determinism of the RA is ably made in *Post Fordism and Social Form* (edited by Bonefeld and Holloway) and reviewed in *Aufheben* 2 (Summer 1993).

view of capital is always going to be a tendency of the academic thinker paid by the state.<sup>82</sup>

Objectivist Marxism does partly grasp the reality of capitalism but only from one pole - that of capital. The categories of *Capital* which are based on the reifying of social relations in capitalism are accepted by this Marxism as a given rather than a contested reality. The subsumption of working class labour is taken as final where it is something that must be repeatedly made. The working class is accepted as a cog in the development of capital which develops by its own laws. Tendencies such as rising organic composition is taken as a technical law intrinsic to capital's essence while it and its counter tendencies are actually areas of contestation. It is necessary to come at the process from the other pole - that of the struggle against reification, which is what groups like Socialism or Barbarism and the situationists did. Their move away from crisis theory was understandable and a necessary part of rediscovering revolutionary practice in the post war boom. However when crisis resurfaced it was the objectivists who seemed to have the tools to grasp it. Yet they failed to come out with an adequate political direction from their theory. The idea was simply that they understood the crisis so people should flock to their banner. However in Italy there emerged a current whose rejection of objectivism included a new way of relating to crisis.

---

82 On the other hand the analysis of the autonomists never lost the point of view of the working class. The point is that though some of the Italian theorists were academics they were also part of a revolutionary current. They might be 'thinkers sponsored by the state' but when half of them get arrested and banged up for years it becomes reasonable to believe that their ideas were contradictory to their position.

### 3. THE WORKERIST/AUTONOMIST CURRENT

A strong tendency in the Italian New Left is represented by the ‘workerist’<sup>83</sup> theoreticians of the ‘60s such as Panzieri and Tronti and the autonomists of the late ‘60s and ‘70s in which Negri and Bologna come to prominence. They attacked the reified categories of objectivist Marxism. Attacking the objectivism of orthodox Marxism also brought into question the crisis-decline problematic that was so dominant. Part of the strength of this current was that rather than simply assert Marx against a straightforwardly reformist labour movement it had to deal with theoretically sophisticated and prestigious Marxism of the hegemonic Italian Communist Party. The PCI in its transition from Stalinism to Eurostalinism had shifted from contemplation of capitalism’s general crisis to support for its continuing development. The workerists recognised that both positions shared a contemplative position on the capitalist economy and that what was needed was a reversal of perspective to look at capitalism from the point of view of the working class.

Raniero Panzieri, one of the initiators of the current contributing two fundamental critiques of orthodox Marxism. He attacked the false opposition of planning and capitalism; and the idea of the neutrality of technology contained in the ideology of the productive forces.

#### 1) THE FALSE OPPOSITION OF PLANNING AND CAPITALISM

Panzieri argued that planning is not the opposite of capitalism. Capitalism, as Marx noted, is based on despotic planning at the point of production. Capitalism transcended previous modes of production by appropriating co-operation in the productive process. This is experienced by the worker as control of her activity by another. In nineteenth century capitalism this despotic planning contrasts with anarchic competition at

---

83 Italian ‘workerism’ refers not as with the Anglo-Saxon use of the term to the idea that only shop-floor struggle is meaningful, but to the attempt to theorize capitalism from the working class’s perspective.

the social level. Panzieri argued that the problem with orthodox Marxism and its theory of decline is that it takes this period of laissez faire capitalism as the true model, change from which must represent the decline of capitalism or transition to socialism. The conception Panzieri and later Tronti developed was that mid-twentieth century capitalism had to a certain extent transcended the opposition of planning versus market, becoming a more advanced capitalism characterised by the attainment of the domination of society by Social Capital; the progressive formation of a Social Factory. At the social level capitalist society is not just anarchy but is social capital - the orientation of all areas of life to the imposition of the capitalist relation of work.

With this the central contradiction on which orthodox Marxism based its theory of decline is undermined. There is no fundamental contradiction between capitalist socialisation of production and capitalist appropriation of the product. The 'anarchy of the market' is one part of the way capital organises society but capitalist planning is another. These two forms of capitalist control are not in deadly contradiction but in a dialectical interaction:

with generalised planning capital extends the fundamental mystified form of the law of surplus value from the factory to the entire society, all traces of the capitalist process' origins and roots now seem to really disappear. Industry re-integrates in itself financial capital, and then projects to the social level the form specifically assumed by the extortion of surplus value. Bourgeois science calls this projection the neutral development of the productive forces, rationality, planning.<sup>84</sup>

The planning we see in capitalism is not transitional. With the identification of socialism and planning, socialism from being the negation of capitalism becomes one of its tendencies. What emerged from the

---

84 'Surplus Value and Planning' in *The Labour Process and Class Strategies*, CSE Pamphlet No.1, p. 21.

development of monopoly/finance capital was not the basis for a non-capitalist mode of production but for a more socially integrated form of capitalism.<sup>85</sup> Capital overcame some of the difficulties of its earlier phase but its process of doing so was interpreted as its final stage.

## II) THE CRITIQUE OF TECHNOLOGY

Related to Panzieri's deconstruction of the planning/anarchy of market dichotomy was his perhaps even more path-breaking critique of technology. Capitalism's despotic planning operates through technology. Essentially Panzieri argued that in capitalism technology and power are interwoven in such a way that one must abandon the orthodox Marxist notion of the neutrality of technology. Once again what is being critiqued here is the reified nature of the terms in the orthodox conception of the productive forces rattling against the chains of their capitalist fetters.

There exists no 'objective', occult factor inherent in the characteristics of technological development or planning in the capitalist society of today, which can guarantee the 'automatic' transformation or 'necessary'

85 While some of those influenced by Bordiga became the archetypal dogmatic proponents of the theory of decadence others developed some of his ideas in an interesting direction with parallels to the workerists. Invariance (Jacques Camatte et al.) theorised that the increasing socialization of production expressed not the decline of capital but the shift from capital's formal subsumption of the labour process to its real subsumption i.e. the shift from capitalist supervision of a labour process dependent on workers' skills and understanding, to complete capitalist domination of the whole process. Furthermore they saw a shift from capital's formal domination of society to its real domination. However we might say that their attention to the autonomy of capital insufficiently recognised that this process is constantly contested; this led them to see revolution as a catastrophist explosion of repressed subjectivity.

overthrow of existing relations. The new 'technical bases' progressively attained in production provide capitalism with new possibilities for the *consolidation* of its power. This does not mean, of course, that the possibilities for overthrowing the system do not increase at the same time. But these possibilities coincide with the wholly subversive character which working-class 'insubordination' tends to assume in face of the increasingly independent 'objective framework' of the capitalist mechanism.<sup>86</sup>

This exemplifies the change the 'workerist' perspective represented - the turn from some 'occult' movement of the productive forces considered technically to the greatest productive force - the revolutionary class. Panzieri was responding to a new combativity of the working class, its coming together to pose a threat to capital but "This *class* level" as he puts it "expresses itself not as progress, but as rupture; not as 'revelation' of the occult rationality in the modern productive process, but as the construction of a radically new rationality counterposed to the rationality practised by capitalism."<sup>87</sup>

While the mainstream Marxists, whether ostensibly revolutionary or reformist, were and are stuck in a reformist attitude towards capitalist technology, i.e. the expressed wish of organising it by means of the plan more efficiently and more rationally, Panzieri had seen the extent to which the working class were the much better dialecticians who recognised "the unity of the 'technical' and 'despotic' moments of the present organisation of production."<sup>88</sup> Machine production and other forms of capitalist technology are a historically specific product of class struggle. To see them as 'technically' neutral is to side with capitalism. That this

---

86 R. Panzieri, 'The Capitalist Use of Machinery: Marx Versus the 'Objectivists'' in P Slater ed., *Outlines of a Critique of Technology* (Ink Links, 1980), p. 49.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

view has dominated orthodox Marxism makes it no wonder that some now wish to reject the historical critique of capitalism in favour of an anti-technology perspective. The problem with substituting the simple negation of ‘civilisation’ for the determinate negation [*Aufhebung*] of capitalism is not just that some of us want to have washing machines, but that it prevents one connecting with the real movement.

The critique of technology combined with the reversal of perspective allowed the workerists to reclaim the critique of political economy as a revolutionary tool by the proletariat. As we have seen, a crucial part of most theories of crisis and decline is the tendency for the rate of profit to fall due to the rising organic composition of capital brought about by capital’s replacement of labour (the source of value) by machines. The Italians took an overlooked statement by Marx “It would be possible to write a history of all the inventions introduced by capital since 1830 just to give them weapons against the revolts of the working class”<sup>89</sup> and developed it into a theory that made capital’s technological development a response to and interaction with working class struggle, the capitalist labour process becoming a terrain of constantly repeated class struggle. By founding capitalist development on working-class struggle the workerists made sense of Marx’s note that the greatest productive force is the revolutionary class itself.

When we see the constant increase in organic composition as a product of working class struggle and human creativity, the tendency for the rate of profit to fall starts to lose its objectivist bias. Capital’s turn from an absolute surplus value strategy to a relative surplus value strategy<sup>90</sup>

---

89 Capital, vol. 1, p. 563.

90 I.e. From a strategy of increasing exploitation through lengthening the working day to one of increasing productivity, thereby lengthening the section of the existing working day during which the worker produces surplus-value.

was forced on it by the working class and has resulted in capital and the working class being locked in a battle over productivity. The categories of the organic and technical composition of capital become de-reified in this workerist theory and linked with the notion of class composition, that is with the forms of class subjectivity and struggle accompanying the 'objective' composition of capital. Using this notion the theorists of workers' autonomy developed the critique of earlier forms of organisation, such as the vanguard party, as reflecting a previous class composition and theorised the new forms of struggle and organisation of the mass worker. This puts a whole new light on the decline of capitalism / transition to communism question:

The so-called inevitability of the transition to socialism is not on the plane of the material conflict; rather precisely upon the basis of the *economic* development of capitalism - it is related to the 'intolerability' of the social rift and can manifest itself only as the acquisition of political consciousness. But for this very reason, working-class overthrow of the system is a negation of the entire organisation in which capitalist development is expressed - and first and foremost of technology as it is linked to productivity.<sup>91</sup>

We see then that the first wave of Italian workerism in the '60s rejected of the view that the period of laissez faire marked the proper existence of capitalism and that what has happened since is its decline or decay in favour of an analysis of the concrete features of contemporary capitalism. This allowed them to see the tendency towards state planning as expressing the tendencies of capitalism to the full: Social Capital. They also broke from orthodox Marxism in their reversal of perspective to see the working-class as the motive force of capital, backed up by militant research on the struggles of the mass worker.

---

91 'The Capitalist Use of Machinery: Marx Versus the 'Objectivists'' in *Outlines of a Critique of Technology*, op. cit., p. 60.



## III) THE CLASS STRUGGLE THEORY OF CRISIS

There are similarities with Socialism or Barbarism's analysis but the autonomists' positions, based as they were on a reinterpretation of the tools offered by Marx's critique of political economy rather than a rejection of them, were better able to respond to the crisis that opened up in the '70s. In fact the crisis of the seventies could be said to show the accuracy of Tronti's 1964 suggestion that it was possible that "The first demands made by proletarians in their own right, the moment that they cannot be absorbed by the capitalist, function objectively as forms of refusal that put the system in jeopardy.. simple political blockage in the mechanism of objective laws."<sup>92</sup> Capitalism's peaceful progress was shattered in the late '60s and the Italian workerists theory went furthest in understanding this, just as the Italian workers' practice during the '70s went furthest in attacking the capital relation.

As we saw with Mattick the orthodox Marxist response to Keynesianism was to argue that it could not really alter the laws of motion of capital and that it could only delay the crisis. At one level this is correct but the problem is that the economy is seen as a machine rather than the reified appearance of antagonistic social relations. The autonomist advance expressed in such works as two essays by Negri in '68<sup>93</sup> was to grasp Keynesianism as a response to the 1917 working class offensive, an attempt to turn working class antagonism to the benefit of capital. Keynes was a strategic thinker for capital and Keynesianism by channelling working class struggle into wage increases paid for by rising productivity was essentially not just demand management of the economy but the state management of the working class, a management that becomes increasingly violent as the

92 Working Class Autonomy and the Crisis (Red Notes and CSE Books), p. 17.

93 'Keynes and Capitalist Theories of the State Post 1929' and 'Marx on Cycle and Crisis', both in Revolution Retrieved (London: Red Notes, 1988)

working class refuses it. The precarious balance that it represented was flung into crisis by the working class offensive of the late '60s and '70s which ruptured the productivity deals upon which the accumulation was premised. The whole post-war Keynesian/Fordist period was seen in the autonomist analysis as the period of the planner state that had now been flung into crisis and was being replaced by the active use of crisis by the state to maintain control.

The class struggle theory of crisis is a necessary corrective to the objectivists' views. The fundamental point in autonomist Marxism was to turn capitalist crisis from the fatalistic outcome of objective laws standing above the working class into the objective expression of class struggle. The notion of an epoch of decline or decadence is effectively bypassed by this theory of the concrete struggles of the class. The history of capitalism is not the objective unfolding of capital's laws but a dialectic of political composition and recomposition. The serious world crisis that opened in the '70s is thus seen as the result of the struggles of the Fordist mass worker. That subject, which had itself been created by capital's attack on the post first world war class composition that had almost destroyed it, had politically recomposed itself into a threat to capital. The crisis of capital is the crisis of the social relation.

During the '70s the autonomists produced the most developed theorisation of the refusal of work and a critique of the catastrophist theory of the crisis in favour of a dynamic theory of capitalist crisis and proletarian subjectivity. The autonomists developed a class struggle theory of the crisis exemplified in the slogan 'The Crisis of the Bosses is a Victory of the Workers'. This puts them in sharp variance with the orthodox Marxist explanation of crisis<sup>94</sup> in terms of internal contradictions of capital with

---

94 In fact your orthodox Marxist militant will think it wrong to suggest that crisis could possibly be the work of the working-class. "No, no, no" s/he'll say "that's a right wing argument; crisis is the fault

the general crisis caused by its decline brought on by its fettering of the productive forces by the relations of production. The notion that capital fetters the productive forces, though in a sense true, forgets that at times of strength the working class fetters the productive forces understood in capitalist terms - the working class fetters the development of the productive forces because their development is against its interests, its needs. The significance of the resistance of the proletariat to capitalist work must not be missed in a socialist dream of work for all. As Negri puts it, "Liberation of the productive forces: certainly, but as the dynamic of a process which leads to abolition, to negation in the most total form. *Turning from the liberation-from-work toward the going-beyond-work forms the centre, the heart of the definition of communism.*"<sup>95</sup>

Autonomist theory was in some ways an optimistic projection forward of tendencies in the existing struggle. This worked fine when the class struggle was going forward and thus when revolutionary tendencies became realised in further actions. So for example Tronti developed the notion of a new kind of crisis set off by workers' refusal because he saw it prefigured in the battle of Piazza Fontana (events in 1962 when striking FIAT workers attacked the unions with great violence). The Italian Hot Autumn in 1969 when workers would often go on strike immediately after they came back to work from a previous strike showed the validity of this projection. However such theoretical projection, which the situationists also made in seeing the emergence of wildcat strikes in England in particular

---

of capital; the working class - bless his cloth cap - is free of any involvement in it - the crisis shows the irrationality of capitalism and the need for socialism". But this was precisely what the autonomists attacked - socialism seen as the resolution of capital's crisis tendency.

95 Marx Beyond Marx, (London: Autonomedia/Pluto, 1991), p. 160.

as a sign of things to come,<sup>96</sup> became inadequate when in capital's counter offensive against this refusal the tendencies that were to be later realised were that of a re-imposition of work. Autonomist theorists tried to grasp this with notions like that of the shift from the planner to the crisis state.

The class struggle theory of crisis lost its way somewhat in the '80s, for while in the seventies the breaking of capital's objective laws was plain, with capital's partial success the emergent subject was knocked back. It appears that during the '80s we have seen the objective laws of capital given free reign to run amok through our lives. A theory which connected the manifestations of crisis to the concrete behaviours of the class found little offensive struggle to connect to and yet crisis remained. The theory had become less appropriate to the conditions. Negri's tendency to extreme optimism and overstatement of tendencies as realities, while not too bad in a time of proletarian subversion, increasing became a real problem in his theorising, allowing him to slip in his own decline thesis. Out of the relation to the revolutionary movement Negri's writings suffer massively. In writings like *Communists Like Us* and his contribution to *Open Marxism* we even see in a new subjectivist guise the theory of a decline of capital/emergence of communism behind our back.<sup>97</sup>

---

96 Not to mention Marx and the Silesian miners.

97 For example on p. 88 of *Open Marxism II*: "new technical conditions of proletarian independence are determined within the material passages of development and therefore, for the first time, there is the possibility of a rupture in the restructuration which is not recuperable and which is independent of the maturation of class consciousness." He seems to think that this possibility is linked in with the immaterial labour of computer programrners! It seems that many radical thinkers show a tendency to lose clarity in their old age or, more accurately, when the movement to which they are connecting falls back. Perhaps it is a question of using Negri against Negri as we

All in all the autonomists are a necessary move but not a complete one, they expressed the movement of their time but, in Negri's case anyway become weak in isolation from it. We might say that just as '68 showed the limitations as well as validity of situationists ideas the period of crisis and revolutionary activity in Italy in the decade '69-'79 showed the validity and limitation of the workerist and autonomists theory. This does not mean we need to go back to the objectivists but forward. Autonomist theory in general and the class struggle theory of crisis in particular did essential work on the critique of the reified categories of objectivist Marxism. It allows us to see them "as modes of existence of class struggle".<sup>98</sup> If at times they overstate this, failing to see the real extent to which the categories do have an objective life as aspects of capital, it remains necessary to maintain the importance of the inversion. We need a way of conceiving the relation of objectivity and subjectivity that is neither the mechanics of the objectivists nor the reactive assertion that its 'all class struggle'.

S or B, the situationists, and the autonomists all, in different ways, made important contributions to recovering the revolutionary core of Marx's critique of political economy. They did this by breaking from the catastrophist theory of decline and breakdown. But the revolutionary wave they were part of has receded. The post-war boom is now a fading memory. Compared to the era in which these revolutionary currents developed their theories the capitalist reality we face today is far more

---

(must sometimes?) use Marx against Marx, and perhaps also we should see decadence theory as a slippage made by revolutionaries when the movement they are part of recedes (post 1848, post 1917 post 1977). When the movement of class struggle that one could connect to seems to lose its power there is a temptation to give power to capital's side - a temptation that should be resisted.

98 See R. Gunn (1989) 'Marxism and Philosophy', *Capital & Class*, 37.

uncertain. Capitalism's tendency to crisis is even more evident, yet class struggle is at a low ebb. In the third and final part of this article we shall look at more recent attempts to solve the problem of understanding the world we live in, such as that of the Radical Chains group, and put forward our own contribution to its solution.

## Part 3

### INTRODUCTION: THE STORY SO FAR

As our more patient and devoted readers will know, the subject of this article is the theory that capitalism is in decline. In the previous two issues, we traced out in detail the development of the theory of the decline of capitalism which has emerged amongst Marxists and revolutionaries over the last hundred years. In this, the final part of the article, we shall bring our critical review up to date by examining the most recent version of the theory of decline, which has been put forward by Radical Chains. But before considering Radical Chains and their new version of the theory of the decline of capitalism, we should perhaps, for the benefit of our less patient and devoted readers, summarize the previous two parts of this article.

In Part 1, we saw how the theory of decline, and the conceptions of capitalist crisis and the transition to socialism or communism related to it, played a dominant role in revolutionary analysis of twentieth century capitalism. As we saw, the notion that capitalism is in some sense in decline originated in the classical Marxism developed by Engels and the Second International.

At the time of the revolutionary wave that ended World War I, the more radical Marxists identified the theory that capitalism was in decline as the objective basis for revolutionary politics. They took as their guiding principle the notion from Marx ‘That at a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production... From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution’<sup>99</sup>. They argued that capitalism had entered this

---

<sup>99</sup> Preface to *A Contribution...* - we’ll come back to the meaning of this later on

stage and this was expressed in its permanent crisis and clear objective movement towards breakdown and collapse.

In the wake of the defeat of the revolutionary wave following World War I, for those traditions which claimed to represent 'proper Marxism', against its betrayal - first by the reformist Social Democrats and then by Stalinism - the acceptance of the notion that capitalism was in decline became a tenet of faith.

For the left-communists, the notion that capitalism had entered its decadent phase with the outbreak of war in 1914 was vital since it allowed them to maintain an uncompromising revolutionary position while at the same time claiming to represent the continuation of the true orthodox Marxist tradition<sup>100</sup>. For the left-communists, the reformist aspects of the politics of Marx, Engels and the Second International, which had led to support for trade unionism and for participation in parliamentary elections, could be justified on the grounds that capitalism was at that time in its ascendant phase. Now, following the outbreak of the World War I, capitalism had gone into decline and was no longer in a position to concede lasting reforms to the working class. Thus, for the left-communists, the only options in the era of capitalist decline were those of 'war or revolution!'

For the Trotskyists and other associated socialists, the increase of state intervention and planning, the growth of monopolies, the nationalization of major industries and the emergence of the welfare state all pointed to the decline of capitalism and the emergence of the necessity of socialism. As a consequence, for the Trots the task was to put forward 'transitional demands' - that is, apparently reformist demands that appear reasonable given the development of the productive forces but which contradict the prevailing capitalist relations of production.

---

100 Pannekoek was a dissenting voice in the move by the left- and council communists to embrace a theory of decline



So, despite the otherwise fundamental differences that divide left-communists from the Trots<sup>101</sup>, and which often placed them in bitter opposition to each other, for both of these tendencies the concrete reality of capitalist development was explained in terms of an objective logic heading towards capitalist collapse and socialist revolution. The underlying objective reality of the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production reduced the problem of that revolution to organizing the vanguard or party to take advantage of the crisis that would surely come.

However, instead of ending in a revolutionary upsurge as most decline theorists predicted, World War II was followed by one of the most sustained booms in capitalist history. While the productive forces seemed to be growing faster than ever before, the working class in advanced capitalist countries seemed content with the rising living standards and welfare benefits of the post-war social democratic settlements. The picture of an inescapable capitalist crisis prompting a working class reaction now seemed irrelevant.

Then, when class struggle did eventually return on a major scale, it took on forms - wildcat strikes (often for issues other than wages), refusal of work, struggles within and outside the factory - which did not fit comfortably into the schema of the old workers' movement. Many of these struggles seemed marked not by a knee-jerk reaction to economic hardship caused by 'capitalism's decline', but by a struggle against alienation in all its forms caused by capital's continued growth, and by a more radical conception of what lay beyond capitalism than was offered by socialists.

It was in this context that the new currents we looked at in Part 2 of this article emerged. What currents like Socialism or Barbarism, the

---

101 While left-communism has defended revolutionary positions against Trotskyism, this defence is undermined and appears dogmatic by being grounded on a rigid conception of capitalist decadence.

situationists and the autonomists shared was a rejection of the 'objectivism' of the old workers' movement. Rather than put their faith in an objective decline of the economy, they emphasized the other pole: the subject. It was these theoretical currents and not the old left theorists of decline that best expressed what was happening - the May '68 events in France, the Italian Hot Autumn of '69 and a general contestation that spread right across capitalist society. Though more diffuse than the 1917-23 period, these events were a revolutionary wave questioning capitalism across the world.

However, in the 1970s, the post-war boom collapsed. Capitalist crisis returned with a vengeance. The turn by the new currents away from the mechanics of capitalist crisis which had been an advantage now became a weakness. The idea that capitalism was objectively in decline was back in favour and there was a renewal of the old crisis theory. At the same time, in the face of the crisis and rising unemployment, there was a retreat of the hopes and tendencies which the new currents had expressed.<sup>102</sup> As the crisis progressed, the refusal of work, which the new currents had connected to, and which the old leftists could not comprehend, seemed to falter before the onslaught of monetarism and the mass re-imposition of work.

However, the various rehashings of the old theory of capitalist crisis and decline were all inadequate. The sects of the old left, which had missed the significance of much of the struggle that had been occurring, were now sure that the mechanics of capitalist decline had been doing its work. Capital would be forced now to attack working class living standards and the proper class struggle would begin. These groups could now say 'we understand the crisis: flock to our banner'. They believed that, faced with the collapse of the basis of reformism, the working class would turn to them. There was much debate about the nature of the crisis; conflicting

---

102 The autonomists made the best theoretical response with their class struggle theory of crisis, but this lost its way when the offensive class struggle receded.

versions were offered; but the expected shift of the working class towards socialism and revolution did not occur.

This, then, is the situation we find ourselves in. While the advances of the new currents - their focus on the self-activity of the proletariat, on the radicality of communism etc. - are essential references for us, we nevertheless need to grasp how the objective situation has changed. The restructuring that has accompanied crisis, and the subsequent retreat of working class, has made some of the heady dreams of the '68 wave seem less possible. To some extent there has been an immiseration of the imagination from which that wave took its inspiration. There is a need to rethink, to grasp the objective context in which class struggle is situated. The bourgeoisie and state do not seem able to make the same concessions to recuperate movements, so the class struggle often takes a more desperate form. In the face of a certain retreat of the subject - lack of offensive class struggle - there is a temptation to adopt some sort of decline theory. It is in this context that the ideas of the journal *Radical Chains* are important.

### **THE RADICAL CHAINS SYNTHESIS**

Despite all their faults and ambiguities, *Radical Chains* have perhaps more than any other existing group made a concerted attempt to rethink Marxism in the wake of the final collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the fall of Stalinism. In doing so, they have sought to draw together the objectivism of the Trotskyist tradition with the more 'subjectivist' and class struggle oriented theories of autonomist Marxism. From the autonomists, *Radical Chains* have taken the idea that the working class is not a passive victim of capital but instead forces changes on capital.<sup>103</sup> From the Trotskyist

103 See for example Negri's argument that the Keynesian form of the state, which promoted full employment and rising living standards paid for by increased productivity, was a strategic response by capital to the threat of proletarian revolution. A. Negri (1988). *Revolution* Retrieved. London: Red Notes

Hillel Ticktin, Radical Chains have taken the idea that one must relate such changes to the law of value, and its conflict with the emergent 'law of planning'.

In adopting the notion that the present epoch of capitalism is a transitional one, characterized by a conflict between an emergent 'law of planning' - which is identified with the emergence of communism - and a declining law of value, Radical Chains are inevitably led towards a theory of capitalist decline, albeit one which emphasizes class struggle. Indeed, as we shall see, the central argument of Radical Chains is that the growing power of the working class has forced capitalism to develop administrative forms which, while preventing and delaying the emergence of the 'law of planning' - and with this the move to communism - has undermined what Radical Chains see as capitalism's own essential regulating principle - the law of value.<sup>104</sup> As such, Stalinism and social democracy are seen by Radical

---

104 Part of the whole problem with Radical Chains and Ticktin is the use of the term 'law of value'. The idea is that, by referring to the 'law of value', a profundity is reached. As Radical Chains say, 'The analysis puts the law of value at the centre. Agreement or disagreement requires a grasp of the law of value.' It is because Ticktin has done this that Radical Chains see him as a good Marxist. The law of value is used to sum up capitalism - it is its essence. But if law of value is used like this, it must be taken in its widest possible sense as summing up all the laws of motion of capital: the production and accumulation of absolute surplus-value, the revolutionizing of the labour process to produce relative surplus-value, the compulsion to increase productivity and so on. On the other hand, the law of value has a narrower meaning simply as the market. When the two senses become confused, when changes to the narrow law of value - limits on the market - are seen as capital's decline, the other aspects of capitalism are forgotten. Radical Chains think they have opened up the meaning of the law of value by focusing

Chains as the principal political forms of the **‘partial suspension of the law of value’** which have served to delay the transition from capitalism to communism.

However, before we examine Radical Chains’ theory of the ‘partial suspension of the law of value’ in more detail, it is necessary to look briefly at its origins in the work of Hillel Ticktin which has been a primary influence in the formation of this theory.

## TICKTIN AND THE FATAL ATTRACTION OF FUNDAMENTALISM

Hillel Ticktin is the editor and principal theorist of the non-aligned Trotskyist journal Critique. What seems to make Ticktin and Critique attractive to Radical Chains is that his analysis is not tied to the needs of a particular Trotskyist sect but takes the high ground of an attempt to recover classical Marxism. As such, for Radical Chains, Ticktin provides a perceptive and sophisticated restatement of classical Marxism.

With Ticktin, the Second International’s central notion, which opposed socialism as the conscious planning of society to the anarchy of the market of capitalism, is given a ‘scientific’ formulation in terms of the opposition between the ‘law of planning’ and the ‘law of value’. Ticktin then seeks to ‘scientifically’ explain the laws of motion of the current transitional epoch of capitalism’s decline in terms of the decline of capitalism’s defining regulatory principle - the ‘law of value’ - and the incipient rise of the ‘law of planning’ which he sees as heralding the necessary emergence of socialism.

Like the leading theorists of classical Marxism, Ticktin sees the decline of capitalism in terms of the development of monopolies, increased state intervention in the economy and the consequent decline of the free market and laissez faire capitalism. As production becomes increasingly it on labour-power, but they still conceive of it purely in terms of the market.

socialized on an ever greater scale, the allocation of social labour can no longer operate simply through the blind forces of the market. Increasingly, capital and the state have to plan and consciously regulate production. Yet the full development of conscious planning contradicts the private appropriation inherent in capitalist social relations. Planning is confined to individual states and capitals and thus serves to intensify the competition between these capitals and states so that the gains of rational planning end up exploding into the social irrationality of wars and conflict. Only with the triumph of socialism on a world scale, when production and the allocation of labour will be consciously planned in the interests of society as whole, will the contradiction between the material forces of production be reconciled with the social relations of production and the 'law of planning' emerge as the principal form of social regulation.

However, unlike the leading theorists of classical Marxism, Ticktin places particular emphasis on the increasing autonomy of finance capital as a symptom of capitalism's decline. Classical Marxism, following the seminal work of Hilferding's *Finance Capital*, had seen the integration of banking capital with monopolized industrial capital as the hallmark of the final stage of capitalism which heralded the rise of rational planning and the decline of the anarchy of the market. In contrast, for Ticktin late capitalism is typified by the growing autonomy of financial capital. Ticktin sees twentieth century capitalism as a contradiction between the forms of socialization that cannot be held back and the parasitic decadent form of finance capital. Finance capital is seen as having a parasitic relation to the socialized productive forces. It manages to stop the socialization getting out of hand and thus imposes the rule of abstract labour. However, finance capital is ultimately dependent on its host - production - which has an inevitable movement towards socialization.

By defining the increasing autonomy of finance capital as symptom of capitalism's decadence, Ticktin is able to accommodate the rise of global

finance capital of the past twenty-five years within the classical Marxist theory of decline. To this extent, Ticktin provides a vital contribution to the development of the classical theory of decline.

But it could be objected that the increasing autonomy of finance capital is simply the means through which capital comes to restructure itself. In this view, the rise of global finance capital in the last twenty-five years has been the principal means through which capital has sought to outflank the entrenched working classes in the old industrialized economies by relocating production in new geographical areas and in new industries.

So while the increasing autonomy of finance capital may indeed herald the decline of capital accumulation in some areas, it only does so to the extent that it heralds the acceleration of capital accumulation in others. From this perspective, the notion that the autonomy of finance capital is a symptom of capitalism's decline appears as particularly Anglo-centric. Indeed, in this light, Ticktin's notion of the parasitic and decadent character of finance capital seems remarkably similar to the perspective of those advocates of British industry who have long lamented the 'short termism' of the City as the cause of Britain's relative industrial decline.<sup>105</sup> While such arguments may be true, by adopting them Ticktin could be accused of projecting specific causes of Britain's relative decline on to capitalism as a whole. While footloose finance capital may cause old industrialized economies to decline, it may at one and the same time be the means through which new areas of capital accumulation may arise.

---

105      The idea originating with Hilferding that the era of capitalism's decline is marked by the integration of banking capital with industrial capital can equally be accused of Germano-centrism since Hilferding based such conclusions on the high level of integration of banking capital and the big cartels that typified the German economy at the turn of the century.

This Anglo-centrism that we find in Ticktin's work can be seen to be carried over into the theory put forward by Radical Chains. But for many this would be the least of the criticisms advanced against Radical Chains' attempt to use the work of Ticktin. Ticktin is an unreconstructed Trotskyist. As such, he defends Trotsky's insistence on advancing the productive forces against the working class, which led to the militarization of labour, the crushing of the worker and sailors' uprising at Kronstadt and his loyal opposition to Stalin. But Radical Chains resolutely oppose Ticktin's Trotskyist politics. They insist they can separate Ticktin's good Marxism from his politics.

We shall argue that they can't make this separation: that in adopting Ticktin's theory of decline as their starting point they implicitly adopt his politics. But before we advance this argument we must consider Radical Chains' theory of decline in a little more detail.

#### RADICAL CHAINS

The world in which we live is riven by a contradiction between the latent law of planning and the law of value. Within the transitional epoch as a whole these correspond to the needs of the proletariat and those of capital, which remain the polarities of class relationships across the earth.<sup>106</sup>

This quote from Radical Chains' Statement of Intent succinctly summarizes both their acceptance and their transformation of Ticktin's problematic of capitalist decline. Radical Chains' theory, like Ticktin's, is based on the idea of the conflict between two different organizational principles. It is not enough for the proletariat to be an 'agent of struggle'; it

---

106 Statement of Intent Radical Chains 1-3. In issue 4 there is a slight change. The new formulation is 'The world in which we live is riven by a contradiction between the need for and possibility of planning and the law of value.'



must be ‘the bearer of a new organizational principle that, in its inescapable antagonism to value, must make capital a socially explosive and eventually doomed system.’<sup>107</sup>

But Radical Chains are not Ticktin. Radical Chains accept the idea that the proper working of the law of value has given way to distorted forms of its functioning. However, there is a very significant shift in Radical Chains from conceiving of the law of value purely in terms of the relations between capitals to seeing it in terms of the capital/labour relation. The crucial object of the law of value is not products, but the working class.<sup>108</sup> Thus while for Ticktin it is phenomena like monopoly pricing and governmental interference in the economy that undermine the law of value, for Radical Chains it is the recognition and administration of needs outside the wage - welfare, public health and housing, etc.<sup>109</sup> This is an important shift because it allows Radical Chains to bring in the class struggle.

Central to Radical Chains’ theory is the interplay between the state and the law of value. Their combination creates regimes of need, which is to say ways in which the working class is controlled. If the orthodox decline theory has a schema based on laissez faire free markets as capitalism’s maturity and monopoly capitalism its decline, Radical Chains offer a similar schema based on the application of the law of value to labour-power. Capital’s maturity was when the working class was brought fully under the law

---

107 Radical Chains 4, p.27

108 ‘The law of value does not stand apart from the working class as a separate mechanism; it would be more purposeful to say that the law of value is the existence of the working class standing apart from itself.’ Radical Chains 4, p.21

109 Ticktin occasionally mentions the need-based sector as one factor in the law of value’s decline but Radical Chains revolve their theory around it.

of value; capital's decline is the period when that full subordination was partially suspended by administrative forms.

### FULL LAW OF VALUE

For Radical Chains, the 1834 Poor Law Reform Act was the 'programmatic high point' of capitalism because it marked the establishment of labour-power as a commodity. In the previous Poor Law, the subsistence needs of the working class were met through a combination of wages from employers and a range of forms of parish relief. The New Poor Law unified the wage, by terminating these forms of local welfare. In their place it offered a sharp choice between subsistence through wage labour or the workhouse. The workhouse was made as unpleasant as possible to make it an effective non-choice. Thus the workingclass was in a position of absolute poverty. Its needs were totally subordinate to money, to the imperative to exchange labour-power for the wage. Thus its existence was totally dependent on accumulation. This, Radical Chains argue, was the proper existence of the working class within capitalism.

For Radical Chains, only when the subjective existence of the working proletariat corresponds to this state of absolute poverty is capitalism in proper correspondence with the pristine objectivity of the law of value. Once there is a change in this relation, capital goes into decline.

### THE 'PARTIAL SUSPENSION OF THE LAW OF VALUE'

This full subordination of working class existence to money prompted the working class to see its interests as completely opposed to those of capital and, as a result, to develop forms of collectivity which threatened to destroy capital. The threat is based on the fact that the working class, though atomized by the law of value in exchange, is collectivized by its situation in production. The law of value tries to impose abstract labour, but the working class can draw on its power as particular concrete labour. Radical Chains' idea of proletarian self-formation expressing the law of planning

is bound to its existence as a socialized productive force. In response to the full workings of the law of value, the working class developed its own alternative, pushing towards a society organized by planning for needs.

The bourgeoisie recognized the inevitable and intervened with 'administrative substitutes for planning'. One aspect to the Partial Suspension of the Law of Value is that the bourgeoisie accepted forms of representation of the working class. Responsible unions and working class parties were encouraged. At the same time, there was the abandonment of the rigours of the Poor Law. Radical Chains trace the eventual post World War II social democratic settlement to processes begun by far-sighted members of the bourgeoisie long before. From the late nineteenth century, haphazard forms of poor relief began to supplement the Poor Law. The 1906-12 Liberal government systematized this move to administered welfare.

Such reforms amounted to a fundamental modification of the law of value: the relaxation of the conditions of absolute poverty. The wage was divided with one part remaining tied to work while the other became administered by the state. There was a move to what Radical Chains call the 'formal recognition of need': that is, the working class can get needs met through forms of administration. Bureaucratic procedures, forms, tests and so on enter the life of the working class.

There are now two sides to capital - the law of value and administration. This Partial Suspension of the Law of Value represents national deals with the working class. The global proletariat is divided into national sections which have varying degrees of defence from the law of value. This acts to stop the proletariat's global unification as a revolutionary class, but it also acts as a limit on the effectiveness of the law of value which must act globally.

CRISIS OF THE PARTIAL SUSPENSION OF THE LAW OF  
VALUE

Within the forms of the Partial Suspension of the Law of Value, the working class struggles. It uses the existence of full employment and welfare to increase both sides of the divided wage. Administration proves a much less effective way of keeping the working class in check than the pure workings of the market. Radical Chains see the forms of struggle that the new currents connected to as evidence of the working class breaking out of its containment. The last twenty years or so are seen by Radical Chains as a crisis of the forms of prevention of communism to which capital has responded by trying to reunify the wage and reassert the law of value. Radical Chains do not see much point in looking at the different struggles; the point is to locate them within a grand theoretical perspective!

The attraction of Radical Chains' theory is that the concrete developments of the twentieth century are explained by a combination of subjective and objective factors. Revolutionary theory has a tendency to see the subjective aspect - working class struggle - appearing in revolutionary periods and disappearing without trace at other times. Radical Chains conceptualize the subjective as contained within the forms of the prevention of communism - Stalinism and social democracy - but continuing to struggle and finally exploding them. This analysis seems to have a revolutionary edge, for Radical Chains use the theory to criticize the left's tendency to become complicit with these forms of the prevention of communism. However, there is an ambiguity here because Radical Chains hinge their account on the idea of an underlying process - the breakdown of the essence of capitalism before the essence of communism - planning. This, as we shall argue, is exactly the framework that leads to the left's complicity with capital.

However, before moving to the fundamental conceptual problems that Radical Chains inherit from Ticktin we should point out some problems with their historical account of the rise and fall of capitalism.

## IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE

Radical Chains are right to see the New Poor Law as expressing bourgeois dreams of a working class totally subordinated to capital. They imagine that this period of proper domination beginning in 1834 and lasting till the beginnings of the Partial Suspension of the Law of Value with the movement towards haphazard forms of poor relief in the 1880s, the mature period of capitalism, lasts around fifty years.

But there is a difference between intent and reality. The New Poor Law while enacted in 1834 was resisted by the working class and the parishes so that it was not until the 1870s that it became properly enforced. So virtually as soon as it was enforced the New Poor Law began to be undermined.<sup>110</sup> From this it would seem that the high point of capitalism becomes reduced to little more than a decade or two. From an historical perspective in which feudalism lasted for more than a several centuries, capitalism's maturity is over in the blink of an eye.

Against this notion that capitalism matured for a mere twenty years in the later part of the nineteenth century and has ever since been in decline, it can of course be countered that the world has become far more capitalist during the course of the twentieth century than it has ever been. This view would seem to become substantiated once we grasp the development of capitalism not in terms of the decline of the law of value, but in terms

110 The best source on this topic is chapter three of Public Order and the Law of Labour by Geoff Kay and James Mott (MacMillan, 1982). Essentially Kay and Mott's point is that the application of the law of value to labour through the wage contract has always occurred within a wider law of labour backed by the state. Radical Chains would seem to be very indebted to the analysis in this book, yet Kay and Mott describe no pure subordination which declines. Rather, because the application of the labour contract is always insufficient - labour-power refuses to be simply a commodity - different controls have constantly to be developed.

of the shift from *the formal to the real subsumption of labour to capital* and the concomitant shift in emphasis from the production of *absolute surplus-value to the production of relative surplus-value*.<sup>111</sup>

#### FORMAL AND REAL DOMINATION

In the period dominated by the production of absolute surplus-value, the imperative of the control of labour is simply to create sufficient hardship to force the proletarians through the factory gates.<sup>112</sup> However, once relative surplus-value becomes predominant, a more sophisticated role is required. The capital/labour relation had to be reconstructed. The reduction in necessary labour required the mass production of consumption goods. A constant demand for those goods then became essential to capital. As a result, the working class became an important source not only of labour but also of demand. At the same time, the continual revolutionizing of

111 Marx grasped the nature of class exploitation in capitalist society as being hidden in the payment of a wage for a period of labour some of which - necessary labour - replaced the wages, the rest - unnecessary labour - produced a surplus-value. Absolute surplus-value increases surplus-value by decreasing the amount of time necessary to reproduce the wage. Relative surplus-value thus requires an increase in productivity. The two forms are not mutually exclusive, but one can say that as capitalism develops there is an important shift where the application of science and technology to the revolutionizing of the productive forces in pursuit of relative surplus-value becomes decisive.

112 In the period dominated by the production of absolute surplus-value, the capitalist takes over a labour process that, while capable of greater efficiency of scale, remains essentially the same as it did before capital took it over. Relative surplus-value, on the other hand, demands that the capitalists reorganize the whole labour process. There is a constant revolutionizing of the productive forces; production becomes specifically capitalist and dominates the worker.

the means of production required a more educated workforce and a more regulated reserve army of the unemployed.

Of course Radical Chains are right that these changes are also being forced on capital by the threat of proletarian self-organization. But the idea that they thereby represent capital's decline is not justified. It is only with these new ways of administering the class that relative surplus-value can be effectively pursued. The phenomena of Taylorism and Fordism indicate that capitalism in the twentieth century - the pursuit of relative surplus-value - still had a lot of life in it. Indeed, the post-war boom in which capitalism grew massively based on full employment and the linking of rising working class living standards and higher productivity is perhaps the period when working class needs and accumulation were at their most integrated.

Indeed, from this perspective, the New Poor Law was more of a transitional form in the development of capitalism. On the one hand it was in keeping with the draconian legislation that capital required in its long period of emergence. On the other hand it created a national system to control labour. The multitude of boards that it set up are the direct forerunners of the administrative bodies that came to replace it.

So, rather than a massive break, there is a great deal of continuity between the sorts of institutions created by the 1834 Act and those bureaucratic structures that were set up later. The forms of systematic national management of labour that were created by the New Poor Law simply to discipline the working class were the material basis for new relations of representation, administration and intervention.

We can see, then, that the New Poor Law was introduced to fulfil the needs of a period of the production of absolute surplus-value. What is more, though it was enacted in 1834, it was only in the 1870s that its provisions totally replaced earlier systems of relief. By this time, capital

was shifting to its period in which the production of relative surplus-value came to predominate, and this required a new way of relating to labour.<sup>113</sup>

The underlying problem of Radical Chains' historical analysis is that they take the *laissez faire* stage of capitalism at its own word. Its word is an individualist ideology which was immediately undermined by the growth of collective forms. The idea of a perfect regime of needs under the law of value is a myth. The law of value and capital have always been constrained, first by forms of landed property and of community which preceded it, and then by the class struggle growing up within it. Capital is forced to relate to the working class by other means than the wage, and the state is its necessary way of doing this. The Poor Law expressed one strategy for controlling the working class: administration expresses a different one. Once we see the law of value as always constrained, then the idea of its partial suspension loses its resonance.

#### THE FETISHISM OF PLANNING

Given that Radical Chains seek to emphasize the relation of struggle between the working class and capital, it may seem strange that they do not consider the shift from the formal to real subsumption of labour to capital. Yet such a consideration would not only undermine their commitment to a theory of decline but also run counter to the conceptual framework that they have drawn from classical Marxism through Ticktin. To examine this more closely we must return briefly once more to the origins of classical Marxism's theory of decline.

As we have already noted, the notion of an objectively determined decline of capitalism is rooted in the orthodox interpretation of the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* where Marx states

113 In the Law of Labour, Kay and Mott are good on this. It seems that what Radical Chains have done is take a text written from a more autonomist type perspective and fitted its notions of needs and capacities into a decline problematic. It does not fit.



that ‘At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production... From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution’<sup>114</sup>. For the classical Marxist at the turn of the century, it seemed clear that the social relations of private appropriation and the market were becoming fetters on the increasingly socialized forces of production. The driving force towards revolution was therefore conceptualized as the contradiction between the productive forces’ need for socialist planning and the anarchy of the market and private appropriation.

Of course, implicit in all this is the idea that socialism only becomes justified once it becomes historically necessary to further develop the forces of production on a more rational and planned basis. Once capitalism has exhausted its potential of developing the forces of production on the basis of the law of value, socialism must step in to take over the baton of economic development. From this perspective, socialism appears as little more than the planned development of the forces of production.<sup>115</sup>

---

114 Marx, *Early Writings* (Penguin: Harmondsworth) pp. 425-6

115 It seems to us that, while the dialectic between the forces and relations of production may have been instrumental in the overthrow of feudalism by the bourgeoisie, it cannot be the guarantee of the decline of capital. This contradiction may be the root of crisis, but this does not mean a terminal crisis requiring socialism to resolve it. Unlike earlier modes of production, capitalism is not tied to a level of the productive forces. Rather it is based on the constant revolutionizing of them. It does create a barrier to their growth in the fact that it can only produce for the market. However, the barrier that capital creates for itself is a barrier that it constantly tries to overcome. Capital constantly revolutionizes productive relations to allow its continued expansion. This need to constantly transform social relations means that capital is

---

constantly forced to confront the working class. An established pattern of class compromise cannot be maintained indefinitely. The crisis may create conditions where the proletariat moves towards opposing its needs to those of capital. But equally it is possible for capital to resolve the contradiction at a higher level of the productive forces. Capital revolutionizes its own social relations to continue to develop the productive forces. The perspective of the productive forces is that of capital not the proletariat. The proletarian perspective is of a conscious breaking of that contradiction which otherwise continues.

To take the point by Marx in his 'Preface' as justification for the idea of decline confuses logical with historical decline. Capitalism contains within it the logical/real possibility of decline: i.e., defetishization of the law of value and the creation of the free association of producers in its place. But to see that possibility as a historical fact/epoch is reification: the process of a part of capital (i.e., the proletariat) going beyond capital is reified into something within and of capital and its change of forms. This is not to say that defetishization and thus communism is an ahistorical possibility with no relation to the development of capitalism and the productive forces; in the world market and in the reduction of necessary labour, capitalism creates the basis for communism. But there is no technical level of the productive forces at which communism becomes inevitable or further capitalist development impossible. There is an organic relation between the class struggle and capitalist development. At times, the development of capital and the class reaches a point of possible rupture. Revolutionaries and the class take their chance; if the wave fails to go beyond capital, then capitalism continues at a higher level. Capitalism restructures to neutralize the composition of the class which attacked it: i.e., capitalism takes different forms. The further development of the productive forces is in a way, then, the booby prize for failed revolutions.

However, viewing history in terms of the contradiction between the development of the forces of production and existing social relations, where each form of society is seen to be replaced by a succeeding one which can allow a further development of the forces of production, is to take the view point of capital. By articulating this view, Marx sought to turn the perspective of capital against itself. Marx sought to show that, like preceding societies, capitalism will repeatedly impose limits on the development of the forces of production and therefore open up the possibility for capitalism's own supersession on its own terms.

From the point of view of capital, history is nothing more than the development of the productive forces; it is only with capitalism that production fully realizes itself as an alien force that can appear abstracted from human needs and desires. Communism must not only involve the abolition of classes but also the abolition of the forces of production as a separate power.

By seeing socialism principally as the rationally planned development of the forces of production - and opposing this to the anarchy of the market of capitalism - classical Marxists ended up adopting the perspective of capital. It was this perspective that allowed the Bolsheviks to take up the tasks of a surrogate bourgeoisie once they had seized power in Russia, since it committed them to the development of the forces of production at all costs. The logic of this perspective was perhaps developed most of all by Trotsky who, through his support for the introduction of Taylorism, one-man management, the militarization of labour and the crushing of the rebellion at Kronstadt, consistently demonstrated his commitment to develop the forces of production over and against the needs of the working class.

As a long committed Trotskyist, there are no problems for Tickin in identifying socialism with planning. Indeed, in restating classical Marxism

---

and developing the contradictions between planning and the anarchy of the market, Ticktin draws heavily on the work of Preobrazhensky who, alongside Trotsky, was the leading theoretician of the Left-Opportunity in the 1920s. It was Preobrazhensky who first developed the distinction between the law of planning and the law of value as the two competing principles of economic regulation in the period of the transition from capitalism to socialism. It was on the basis of this distinction that Preobrazhensky developed the arguments of the Left-Opportunity for the rapid development of heavy industry at the expense of the living standards of the working class and the peasantry. Arguments that were later to be put into practice, after the liquidation of the Left-Opportunity, under Stalin.<sup>116</sup>

---

116 It was Stalinism's commitment to planning that led Trotsky and orthodox Trotskyism (together with a multitude of Western socialist intellectuals) to see the USSR as progressive. Ticktin's 'break' from this tradition is to claim that the USSR had neither planning or the market. Ticktin contends that for Lenin and Trotsky planning was necessarily 'democratic'. Lenin's support for Taylorism, and Trotsky's call for the militarization of labour, show that the early Bolsheviks' ideas concerning planning cannot be so easily separated from the Stalinist version. To simply insist on adding the word 'democratic' to the socialist project of the planned development of the productive forces is clearly inadequate. Capital as a social relation is quite compatible with democracy. Communism is a content - the abolition of wage labour - not a form. The unreconstructed nature of Ticktin's Trotskyism is clearly shown in 'What would a socialist society be like?' in Critique 25. It involves, after the taking of power, the 'gradual elimination of finance capital', the 'gradual phasing out of the reserve army of the unemployed', the 'nationalization of major firms and their gradual socialization.'!!

For Radical Chains, adopting the notion that we are in the period of capitalist decline and the consequent transition to socialism, in which the principal contradiction is that between the law of value and the law of planning, is far more problematic. An important part of Radical Chains' project is their attempt to reject the traditional politics of the left, particularly that of Leninism. This is made clear in such articles as 'The hidden political economy of the left', where they resolutely stress importance of the self-activity of the working class and attack the Leninist notion of the passivity of the working class and its need for an externally imposed discipline. Yet this is undermined by their adherence to the 'good Marxism' of Ticktin.

As a result, we find that when pressed on the question of planning Radical Chains' position becomes both slippery and highly ambiguous. Their way of vindicating planning is virtually to identify it with self-emancipation. They ask us to make a revolution in the name of planning and insist that really that is fine because 'Planning is the social presence of the freely associating proletariat and, beyond that, the human form of existence.'<sup>117</sup> But planning is planning. The free association of the proletariat is the free association of the proletariat. For all their efforts, by refusing to break with the framework set out by Ticktin, Radical Chains end up simply criticizing the left's idea of planning from the point of view of planning. For us, this classical leftist Marxism must not be revitalized but undermined. This means questioning its very framework.

For us, the market or law of value is not the essence of capital;<sup>118</sup> its essence is rather the *self-expansion of value*: that is, of alienated labour. Capital is above all an organizing of alienated labour involving a combination of

---

117 Radical Chains 1, p. 11

118 The law of value is one way the essence of capitalism expresses itself. Competition and the market is the way that the law of value is imposed on individual capitals.

market aspects and planning aspects. Capitalism has always needed planning and it has always needed markets. The twentieth century has displayed a constant tension between capitalism's market and planning tendencies. What the left has done is identify with one pole of this process, that of planning. But our project is not simply equal to planning. Communism is the abolition of all capitalist social relations, both of the market and of the alien plan. Of course, some form of social planning is a necessary prerequisite for communism: but the point is not planning as such, as a separate and specialized activity, but planning at the service of the project of free creation of our lives. The focus would be on the production of ourselves, not things. Not the planning of work and development of the productive forces, but the planning of free activity at the service of the free creation of our own lives.

### RADICAL CHAINS CONCLUDED

With Radical Chains we have the most recent and perhaps most sophisticated restatement of the classical Marxist theory of decline. Yet, for us, their attempt to unite such an objectivist Marxist theory with the more class struggle oriented theories which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s has failed, leaving them in a politically compromised position. With Radical Chains our odyssey is complete and we can draw to some kind of conclusion.

### IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION

Is capitalism in decline? Coming to terms with theories of capitalist decline has involved a coming to terms with Marxism. One of the essential aspects of Marx's critique of political economy was to show how the relations of capitalist society are not natural and eternal. Rather, he showed how capitalism was a transitory mode of production. Capital displays itself as transitory. Its negation is within it, and there is a movement to abolish it. However, the theory of decline is not for us. It focuses on decline as a

period within capitalism and it identifies the process of going beyond capital with changes in the forms of capital rather than the struggle against them.

Decline cannot be seen as an objective period of capitalism, nor can the progressive aspect to capital be seen as an earlier period now passed. The progressive and decadent aspects of capital have always been united. Capitalism has always involved a decadent negative process of the commodification of life by value. It has also involved the creation of the universal class in opposition, rich in needs and with the ultimate need for a new way of life beyond capital.

The problem with Marxist orthodoxy is that it seeks capital's doom not in the collective forms of organization and struggle of the proletariat but in the forms of capitalist socialization. It imposes a linear evolutionary model on the shift from capitalism to communism. The revolutionary movement towards communism involves rupture; the theorization of the decline of capitalism misses this by identifying with aspects of capital. As Pannekoek pointed out, the real decline of capital is the self-emancipation of the working class.

# **The Debate - Part 1**

## **Intakes: Communist Theory - Beyond the Ultra-left**

Last century (a few years ago), the French group *Théorie Communiste* (TC) translated and published our articles on 'decadence' (*Aufheben* issues 2 - 4), accompanied by a critique. We publish that critique here, plus a short presentation by TC on their theoretical positions. TC write in quite a difficult style but they deal with important issues. While we are not in full agreement with either TC's overall perspective or all their criticisms of our text, we find what they are saying challenging. If they are on the right track then they have moved beyond the impasse of revolutionary theory as represented by the 'ultra-left'. We are working on a response to be published in the next issue of *Aufheben*, but have found we need to translate more of their texts to understand their perspective more clearly. As some of the political tendencies that TC allude to will be quite obscure to many non-French readers, for this issue we have written an introduction to their introduction of themselves, with some thoughts about the relation between communism, the workers movement and the ultra-left, and the French debates on this from which TC emerge.



## **INTRODUCTION: THE WORKERS' MOVEMENT, COMMUNISM AND THE ULTRA-LEFT**

At the beginning of the '70s it appeared to a whole tendency already critical of the historic ultra-left that the ultra-left's calling into question all the political and union mediations which give form to the proletariat's belonging, as a class, to the capitalist mode of production is far from being enough...

The central theoretical question thus becomes: how can the proletariat, acting strictly as a class of this mode of production, in its contradiction with capital within the capitalist mode of production, abolish classes, and therefore itself, that is to say: produce communism?

-Théorie Communiste

### **COMMUNISM**

Communism is the self-abolition of the proletariat, which is to say, of the capitalist mode of production, because capital is a social relation with the proletariat as one of its poles. This was fundamental to Marx's contribution to communist theory, something he expresses rather well in the following passage of *The Holy Family*:

Proletariat and wealth are opposites; as such they form a single whole. They are both creations of the world of private property. The question is exactly what place each occupies in the antithesis. It is not sufficient to declare them two sides of a single whole.

Private property as private property, as wealth, is compelled to maintain itself, and thereby its opposite, the proletariat, in existence. That is the positive side of the antithesis, self-satisfied private property.

The proletariat, on the contrary, is compelled as proletariat to abolish itself and thereby its opposite, private property, which determines its existence, and which makes it proletariat. It is the negative side of the antithesis, its restlessness within its very self, dissolved and self-dissolving private property.

The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement. But the former class feels at ease and strengthened in this self-estrangement, it recognises estrangement as its own power and has in it the semblance of a human existence. The class of the proletariat feels annihilated in estrangement; it sees in it its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence. It is, to use an expression of Hegel, in its abasement the indignation at that abasement, an indignation to which it is necessarily driven by the contradiction between its human nature and its condition of life, which is the outright, resolute and comprehensive negation of that nature. Within this antithesis, the private property-owner is therefore the conservative side, the proletarian the destructive side. From the former arises the action of preserving the antithesis, from the latter the action of annihilating it.

Indeed, private property drives itself in its economic movement towards its own dissolution, but only through a development which does not depend on it, which is unconscious and which takes place against the will of private property by the very nature of things, only inasmuch as it produces the proletariat as proletariat, poverty which is conscious of its spiritual and physical poverty, dehumanisation which is conscious of its dehumanisation, and therefore self-abolishing. The proletariat executes the sentence that private property pronounces on itself by producing the proletariat, just as it executes the sentence that wage-labour pronounces on itself by producing wealth for others and poverty for itself. When the proletariat is victorious, it by no means becomes the absolute side of society, for it is victorious only by abolishing itself and its opposite. Then the proletariat disappears as well as the opposite which determines it, private property.

When socialist writers ascribe this world-historic role to the proletariat, it is not at all... because they regard the proletarians as gods. Rather

the contrary. Since in the fully-formed proletariat the abstraction of all humanity, even of the semblance of humanity, is practically complete; since the conditions of life of the proletariat sum up all the conditions of life of society today in their most inhuman form; since man has lost himself in the proletariat, yet at the same time has not only gained theoretical consciousness of that loss, but through urgent, no longer removable, no longer disguiseable, absolutely imperative need -- the practical expression of necessity -- is driven directly to revolt against this inhumanity, it follows that the proletariat can and must emancipate itself. But it cannot emancipate itself without abolishing the conditions of its own life. It cannot abolish the conditions of its own life without abolishing all the inhuman conditions of life of society today which are summed up in its own situation. Not in vain does it go through the stern but steeling school of labour. It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment regards as its aim. It is a question of what the proletariat is, and what, in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is visibly and irrevocably foreshadowed in its own life situation as well as in the whole organisation of bourgeois society today. There is no need to explain here that a large part of the English and French proletariat is already conscious of its historic task and is constantly working to develop that consciousness into complete clarity.<sup>119</sup>

---

119 TC themselves would probably not agree with the way Marx approaches the issues here. In their critique of our articles they question our use of the concept of alienation. For TC, Marx's thematic of alienation and *aufheben* in the Economic Manuscripts and *The Holy Family* is not continued in his later work. This is one of the points we have been trying to make sense of by looking at some other of TC's writings - for example: "Let us not confuse 'alienated labour' as it func-

While, in his later writings, Marx would generally use the word 'capital' (or 'the commodity') instead of 'private property', there is for us a fundamental continuity between what is expressed here and his later work.<sup>120</sup> However, notwithstanding Marx's optimism that a large part

---

tions in the Manuscripts and the alienation of labour that we will find in the Grundrisse or in Capital. In the first case, alienated labour is the self-movement of the human essence as generic being; in the second, it is no longer a question of human essence, but of historically determined social relations, in which the worker is separated in part or in whole from the conditions of his labour, of his product and of his activity itself" ('Pour en Finire avec la Critique du Travail', TC, No. 17). We argue that, though Marx's treatment gets steadily more historical and more concrete, the thematic of alienation is essentially the same. This is something we will deal with in our response to their critique.

120 In Capital Marx does not talk about private property because he subsumes it in the commodity (a society of generalized commodity production is one of absolute private property.) In his earlier writings, when he did talk of the system of private property, Marx's attention was already on the capital-labour relation. In the previous year to *The Holy Family*, Marx had written: "the antithesis between propertylessness and property is still an indifferent antithesis, not grasped in its active connection, its inner relation, not yet grasped as contradiction, as long as it is not understood as the antithesis between labour and capital. ... labour, the subjective essence of private property as exclusion of property and capital, objective labour as exclusion of labour, constitutes private property in its developed relation of contradiction: a vigorous relation, driving towards resolution" (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, p. 345, section on Private Property and Communism). Marx does not change his object of study when he focuses on the relation between labour and capital rather than between

of the proletariat in 1845 was developing a consciousness of its historic task - that is, of self abolition - the ideology of the workers' movement quickly became an ideology of work, the dignity of labour, glorification of industry, progress, etc. If one looks at the trajectory of the historical workers' movement, one might easily conclude that, far from trying to abolish the proletariat and the conditions which give rise to it, it has - at least as represented by its dominant traditions - acted to affirm (even generalize) the proletarian condition and to attain recognition for the working class as workers, that is, as subjects within bourgeois society. Instead of the revolutionary watchword, "Abolish the wages system!", which Marx suggested,<sup>121</sup> the workers' movement inscribed on its banner the conservative motto, "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!"

This assessment of the outcome as opposed to the stated intentions of the workers' movement can be applied to all its dominant traditions, both 'Marxist' (social democracy and Stalinism) and non-Marxist (labourism, syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism). The most extreme example, is of course, the large parts of the workers' movement that have supported the USSR, where the identification of socialism with modernization of the 'national economy', the proletarianization of the peasantry, the building of huge factories and exhortations to labour-discipline and productivity - in short, with capitalism - reached its apogee and became a model for 'third world' modernization across the world. Yet we also see it outside

---

alienated labour and private property because the latter is just a more developed and concrete expression of the former. In the form of wage labour and capital, 'private property', which existed before capital, is brought to its highest point of contradiction and antagonism.

121 Marx, at the end of 'Wages, Price and Profit', advised trade unions that instead of the conservative motto, "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!" they ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword, "Abolition of the wages system!"

those who identify directly with Stalinism: in the embrace by syndicalists of productivist ideologies<sup>122</sup> (even allowing a significant number to pass over to fascism), in the social democrat Noske's definition of socialism as 'working a lot', in Lenin's embrace of Taylorism and iron labour discipline, in Trotsky's arguments for the militarization of labour and his critically expressed admiration for Stalin's industrial achievements,<sup>123</sup> in the anarcho-syndicalist militants flinging themselves into organizing production against the resistance of Spanish workers.<sup>124</sup> A further indication of the bankruptcy of the official workers' movement was the way in which the aspects of it

---

122 Even the outstanding example of revolutionary syndicalism - the IWW of the first decades of the twentieth century, which really emphasized the 'abolition of the wage system' - was not immune. The trajectory of many of its militants towards the American Communist Party even as it Stalinized did not come from nowhere. As Wright notes, "the sympathy within certain Wobbly circles for technicians and Taylorist principles betrayed a growing detachment from the IWW's initial rejection of the capitalist organisation of labour." (Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p 195, citing La *Formazione dell'Operaio Massa negli USA 1898/1922*, pp 179-187).

123 "With the bourgeois economists we have no longer anything to quarrel over. Socialism has demonstrated its right to victory, not on the pages of *Das Kapital*, but in an industrial arena comprising a sixth part of the earth's surface-not in the language of dialectics, but in the language of steel, cement and electricity." (*Revolution Betrayed*, Ch. 1.) Even his criticisms of the USSR are often for not being productive and efficient enough, which is not surprising coming from the man who, when he was in charge, advocated military discipline for the work-force.

124 See M. Seidman, *Workers Against Work: Labor in Paris and Barcelona during the Popular Fronts* (UCLA Press, 1993).

which the fascist and Nazi movements<sup>125</sup> did not need to destroy could be integrated quite smoothly into the regimes they established.<sup>126</sup>

Of course, it could all be summed up in terms of betrayals: the betrayal of the social democratic parties and the trade unions, mobilizing workers for slaughter in the first world war and acting to save capitalism against workers insurrection afterwards; the betrayal of Stalin (or earlier, Bolshevik leaders, depending on one's politics), turning the Soviet Union from a vision of hope for workers throughout the world into a workhouse; the betrayal of the anarchist leaders<sup>127</sup> in Spain for joining the government and demobilizing workers' resistance to Stalinist repression.<sup>128</sup> In this view, these tendencies were at one moment on the workers' side, but at crucial moments go over to the side of capital and do so through the failings of their leadership. The point is to defend a pure tradition of - depending on one's ideological perspective - classical Marxism or true anarchism - a red or a black line - from how such traditions expressed themselves

---

125      Of course, the Nazis were not the first to put the national in socialism: the social democrats supported the First World War, a great deal of the way Stalin sold 'Socialism in One Country' was by appealing to the patriotism of the population, and we see later examples in Labour Zionism and various 'third world' socialisms from Tanzania to Cambodia.

126      Just as Nazism and Italian fascism incorporated large parts of social democracy into their regimes, after WW2, social democracy incorporated a great deal of fascism into the post-war order or, as Bordigists provocatively put it, "while the fascist nations lost WW2, fascism won".

127      Of course, by concentrating on the leaders there is an avoidance of the role of CNT rank and file militants in disciplining the Spanish working class and mobilizing for the war effort.

128      See Paul Mattick, 'The Barricades Must be Torn Down'.

historically. Hidden in such assumptions is generally the idea that, with the right leaders or organization, those historical movements would have succeeded and communism would have ‘won’; thus the task becomes to rebuild (or maintain or create) organizations that next time won’t betray us.

But it must be asked, how did these ideologies become possible; how did the working class end up expressing itself in these ways? How did each of these organizational expressions of the proletariat - social democracy, Third International Communism, revolutionary syndicalism, anarcho-syndicalism - all end up supporting capitalism? One can use the term leftism<sup>129</sup> to get a handle on this phenomena but it remains true that leftism does not explain things, leftism needs to be explained.

Now, as Debord emphasized,<sup>130</sup> the movement of workers cannot simply be reduced to its ideological representations. Historically, the class struggle, including that waged by workers identifying with the movements described, has not always stayed within the limits their ideologies prescribe. On an everyday level, the behaviour of workers often runs counter to their political allegiances, the positions adopted by trade unions they might

---

129 Leftism, as a descriptive and derogatory term for ideological positions and practices that present themselves as oppositional but are actually within bourgeois politics, is a useful shorthand. However, its use as an explanation for the failure of movements tends to the dogmatic assumption that somebody/we already possess the correct ‘non-leftist politics’ and the problem is simply getting them across. (See also footnote 30 in the review article, ‘From Operaismo to “Autonomist Marxism”’, in this issue.)

130 See ‘The Proletariat as Subject and as Representation’ in *The Society of the Spectacle*. Also making the point that one must “distinguish between workers’ practice and workers ideology” and relating directly to TC’s arguments is the Tropolin text ‘To Work or not to Work: Is that the Question?’



be members of, and even from their own previously expressed opinions. Organizationally (even before WW1), workers in the heartlands of the Second International expressed themselves in mass political strikes that went against the separation of political and economic action agreed by the social democrat parties and the unions.<sup>131</sup> Representing a more fundamental break, workers responded to the Second International parties and the unions' support for the first world war by leaving these organizations and setting up alternative organizations - factory struggle groups, breakaway parties, etc. Later, opposition to the way the Russian Revolution was developing emerged continuously, within and outside the party, in Russia and beyond. Large numbers of anarchist workers opposed the CNT's line both in terms of economic sacrifices for the war and later over the Maydays.<sup>132</sup> In another example, during WW2 American auto workers responded affirmatively to the combined efforts of employers, state and Stalinists to make them sign a no strike pledge... but then struck anyway!<sup>133</sup>

Thus, as well as signs of workers accepting their role, there is both an everyday contradiction between workers and 'their' organizations' efforts to integrate them into capitalist society, and moments in which the working class has moved to rupture with its representatives. Whether conceiving of themselves as a fundamental break from the mainstream traditions of the workers' movement, or more often as in some way upholding the

---

131 See the account of the significance of the mass strike in Philippe Bourrinet's article 'The Workers' Councils in the Theory of the Dutch-German Communist Left'.

132 The most significant tendency were the Friends of Durruti - see *The Friends of Durruti Group: 1937-1939* by Agustin Guillamon (AK Press 1996).

133 See Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes* (Detroit: Bewick Editions, 1980).

revolutionary kernel those traditions were abandoning, political/theoretical currents have regularly emerged from this contradiction.<sup>134</sup>

## ULTRA-LEFTISM

The 'historic ultra-left' refers to a number of such currents which emerged out of one of the most significant moments in the struggle against capitalism - the revolutionary wave that ended the First World War. Ultra-leftism offers an explanation of why the workers' movement failed to get rid of capitalism, and why in particular the Russian Revolution failed to deliver. Whatever its subsequent history, the ultra-left did not emerge as tiny sects or groups of dissidents but as a part of a mass social movement when the dominant tradition of social democracy was thoroughly discredited and it seemed as though the meaning of the workers' movement and communism was up for grabs. In Western Europe, large numbers of workers made a break with social democratic politics and gravitated to the Third International set up by the Bolshevik Party. However, in the

<sup>134</sup> The ultra-left is certainly not the only point of break. Well before the first world war, social democracy had already produced groups like the 'Young People' in Germany and the SPGB in Britain; later, anarcho-syndicalism produced the Friends of Durruti Group. Trotskyism has produced numerous breakaways, such as the followers of Munis, Socialism or Barbarism, the Johnson-Forrest tendency; Italian Marxist-Leninism produced operaismo/autonomist Marxism and so on. However, while many of these are often also linked with upsurges in the class struggle, none were connected to something as international, deep and obviously threatening to capitalism as that wave of struggle which perhaps peaked in 1919 and which is irretrievably associated with the 1917 Russian Revolution. Also, it is no accident that many of the tendencies emerging later in the twentieth century find themselves moving towards, and labelled by their previous comrades, as ultra-leftism.

crucial formative years after 1917, many sections of the world communist movement, including a majority of those in Italy and Germany (the areas of Western Europe which seemed closest to revolution), had or would develop a different understanding of what a communist break from social democracy amounted to, than that displayed by the leadership of the Bolsheviks. These differences would lead to splits. In 1920, in the build-up to the first proper<sup>135</sup> congress of the Third International, Lenin laid out what he considered the difference between 'Bolshevism' and these other tendencies in his (in)famous pamphlet - *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*.

#### THE TWO ULTRA-LEFTS

One of the two main wings of the historic ultra-left, the Dutch/German Left, parted from the Third International on the basis of the debate opened by Lenin's polemic, on issues like what sort of party communists should form, the attitude to take towards parliament and trade unions, etc. The other main wing - Bordiga's Italian Left - essentially sided with Lenin at this point and only opposed Moscow's dominance of the world communist movement later, around issues like the United Front and Stalin's embrace of 'Socialism in one Country'. Thus, on the grounds around which it split from Moscow, and on issues like nationalism, trade

---

135      The first congress had not really included any foreign communists.

unions<sup>136</sup> and the role of 'the party',<sup>137</sup> the Italian Left appears far from the Dutch/German Left. However, while there is no space in this text to go into the detailed histories of these currents<sup>138</sup> and how their positions

---

136 The most orthodox followers of Bordiga supported participation in trade unions and saw a progressive - if bourgeois - role for third-world nationalism. Interestingly, many of those coming from the Italian Left have tended towards the German/Dutch ultra-left positions on these issues. Bilan, the Italian Left grouping in exile in France in the thirties, started questioning involvement in unions and the idea of any progressive role for nationalism. Two main offshoots of the Italian Left - the ICC (which claims the Bilan tradition) and the IBRP (whose main member is Battaglia Comunista, a group formed in a significant split from orthodox Bordigism in 1953), while maintaining a strong 'Italian Left' belief in the party have moved to anti-union and anti-national liberation positions historically closer to the German/Dutch Left.

137 See the Antagonism pamphlet Bordiga versus Pannekoek. It is important to see that, on inspection, there are elements in the Italian Left conception of the party that differ from that of Lenin and 'Leninists'. Also, as we see with anarchist and council communist groups, the rejection of the term 'party' does not mean that a group or tendency escapes its problems. For a discussion; again see the Antagonism pamphlet and also Camatte's Origin and Function of the Party Form.

138 The main place we have dealt with this history was in Part III of our Russia article, *Aufheben* 8 (1999). For excellent accounts of these two wings of the historic ultra-left see *The Italian Left* and *The Dutch German Left*, published by the ICC. The books were both written by Philippe Bourrinet who has since left the organization we imagine for good reasons. His own revised editions can be found at <http://www.left-dis.nl>.

evolved, there are good reasons to connect the two traditions. Despite the apparently fundamental difference over the role of the party that leads to mutual incomprehension between partisans of each tradition, their political analysis of certain crucial issues, such as grasping the counter-revolutionary nature of the USSR and its CPs, opposing united and popular fronts and maintaining a revolutionary opposition to capitalist wars, identified them together as the ultra-left as against Trotskyism, which defended the USSR, joined social democratic parties, etc. In perhaps the most significant historic example - a test by fire - while 'the left', including most Trotskyists, generally supported democracy and/or the USSR against fascism in the Spanish Civil War and in WW2, both 'wings' of the ultra-left agitated against support for the democratic bourgeoisie against the fascist variety, and against participation in all capitalist conflicts. In all these areas a clear line emerged between adherents of the ultra-left and Trotskyism. However, today the term 'ultra-leftism' is not used simply to describe the hard adherents of these historical traditions of the communist left; we can see it as an area defined by certain political positions and attitudes, which may or may not be taken from the historic ultra-left.

#### A WAR OF POSITIONS?

Ultra-leftism presents itself as having a set of political positions distinct from or even opposed to standard 'leftist' positions. While leftists for a long time considered the USSR and similar regimes to be in some way socialist or at least post-capitalist, ultra-leftism very quickly saw them as capitalist; while leftists generally support trade unions as at the very least defensive working class organizations (while criticising their bureaucracy), ultra-leftists typically reject unions for incorporating the working class into capital and instead emphasize the workers' need to break from them and act independently; while leftism generally calls for participation in parliamentary elections in the form of 'critical support' for reformist working class parties or perhaps to support a strategy of so called

‘revolutionary parliamentarianism’,<sup>139</sup> ultra-leftism rejects such methods as a promotion of illusions; while leftism supports national liberation struggles, ultra-leftism expresses hostility to all nationalism; while leftism for the purposes of ‘winning over workers’ generally adopts ‘united front’ or even ‘popular front’ strategies of uniting with social democrats and even liberals, ultra-leftism sees this as failing to separate revolutionary communist politics from bourgeois politics; while leftists are often led by some of these positions to take sides in capitalist wars, ultra-leftists tend to take an internationalist stance of opposition to all sides. The differences here are so profound that one can see why the ultra-left see themselves as communist and sees leftists as the left wing of capital.

However, immediately after one sets out ultra-leftism as a set of positions or ‘class lines’, problems become evident. There is a tendency for many who identify with the ultra-left to define themselves negatively in relation to the left. There is the class struggle, the left relates to it one way, the ultra-left denounces this. The ultra-left becomes a negative impression of the left.<sup>140</sup> When an organization, or for that matter an individual, appears to adopt some ‘ultra-left’ positions while retaining other ‘leftist’ ones,<sup>141</sup>

---

139 That is, a policy of using parliament as a revolutionary tribunal to denounce parliament and the capitalist system.

140 This is perhaps compounded in Britain and America where many moving towards ultra-left politics do so via anarchism which has always had a great tendency to define itself against the ‘trots’ or the ‘marxists’.

141 To pick an example from the British context, the largest leftist group, the SWP, early on distinguished itself from mainstream Trotskyism by adopting a state capitalist line on the USSR. However, on just about every other issue, and in how it relates itself to the ‘labour movement’, it has conducted itself in exceptionally moderate and even centrist ways. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Maoist and Third

those identifying with the true, i.e. ultra-left, communist tradition are led into acts of demarcation and denunciation which appear as a defence of purity. Upsetting such an ideological operation is the fact that, as we have suggested, the groups that are clearly of the ultra-left do not even agree on all these positions themselves. In the face of this contradiction, it is possible to become partisan of one or other of these traditions<sup>142</sup> to the exclusion of the other or to adopt a bit of a pick-and-mix approach. But whatever the (not irrelevant) fine points in the disputes between the wings of the historic ultra-lefts, which can't be explored here, there is for us a more profound issue.

If, to repeat a formulation we are fond of, communism is the real movement, it is not fundamentally about the adoption of a set of principles, lines and positions.<sup>143</sup> Of course, the positions of the ultra-left emerged out of the class struggle, but such positions were only more or less right

---

Worldist leftist groups will support Stalinist and bureaucratic regimes elsewhere, while opposing the official labour movement - Labour party and Trade Unions. Individuals can be just as contradictory.

142 One can, for example, identify with the Dutch-German Left and dismiss Bordiga as a rigid, or at best principled, Leninist; or identify with Bordiga, and see the council communist ultra-left as syndicalist.

143 To do something we don't often do - quote Engels - "Communism is not a doctrine but a movement springing from facts rather than principles. Communists presuppose not such and such a philosophy but all past history and, above all, its actual and effective results in the civilized countries.... In so far as communism is a theory, it is the theoretical expression of the situation of the proletariat in its struggle and the theoretical summary of the conditions of the liberation of the proletariat." ('The Communists and Karl Heinzen', cited in 'On Organisation' in J. Camatte, *This World we Must Leave*).

when they were made - they are approximations, an expression of 'as revolutionaries best saw it' - and thus something more needs to be done than just agree with them and proselytize. The class struggle can be seen as a wave that advanced to a high point around 1919 and as it receded left ideas around like flotsam in its wake. What these traditions represent is an attempt to maintain the historic lessons of this high point in the class struggle, despite the retreat of that movement. Moreover, the limits of that wave of class struggle - its inability to generalize as world revolution - led to varying revolutionary experiences in different countries expressing themselves in different lessons being drawn... and it is these that lie at the root of the historical spilt between the Lefts. Part of the price that these tendencies paid for maintaining the more or less revolutionary ideas in the circumstances of the more or less complete capitulation of the workers' movement to Stalinism, anti-fascism and the mobilization for another slaughter was that the ideas became somewhat frozen and ideological. When theory becomes an 'ism' - a specific set of positions separate from the class struggle - it is a sign of the retreat of the movement. There is a stiffness in the way many groups and individuals identifying with the 'ultra-left' express themselves. For many, the adoption, reproduction and assertion of these positions mechanically in the face of the class struggle acts to reinforce their own identity as 'revolutionary', while reducing their ability to recognize and relate to the contradictions of real social movements. To think that the positions are simply revolutionary, or that adopting them makes one revolutionary, reifies what being revolutionary is. Communism is the attempt to express the real movement; but the real movement is not fully present until it is successful; thus communist theory is only partial - an aspiration - and the theoretical work is never quite finished. It is taken forward by advances in the class struggle and the reflection on this. Put another way, theory does not take the point of view



of the totality but of the aspiration to the totality.<sup>144</sup> It is inadequate and unhistorical to assume that the ultra-left had the right ideas but that they simply lost out to the wrong ones, and on this basis to assert its critique of trade unions and leftist political parties when the opportunity occurs.

As we said in our first editorial,<sup>145</sup> the '60s and '70s saw a re-emergence of a whole series of theoretical currents, which included the ultra-left. But while a number of groups that sprung up regurgitated as ideology the theories they were discovering, others worked to actually develop theory adequate to the new conditions. The task before the new generation was to take up ideas, such as those of the historic ultra-left, in a non-ideological way. An irony was that the place where their legacy has been taken up in a dynamic and original way has not been Germany, Holland or Italy, but France. There is a real sense in which the 'modern' ultra-left has largely been a French phenomenon.

#### ULTRA-LEFTISM AS A FRENCH TRADITION<sup>146</sup>

The May '68 movement, or at least its most advanced elements, gravitated towards a 'councilist' perspective: derived from the Dutch/German Left, councilism rejected Leninism and the party and put its faith in the 'workers councils'.<sup>147</sup> A total surprise to the left, the character of this movement had best been prefigured in the analyses of non-orthodox

144 See John Holloway's take of this undeveloped point in *Change the World Without Taking Power* (Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 80-88.

145 See *Aufheben* 1 (Autumn 1992).

146 We are largely writing this from what has been translated by them; TC and others could tell the story more fully, though probably in a more partisan way - for example, their remark that Dauvé was "trying to spice up the ultra-left with an injection of Bordigism".

147 See R. Gregoire & F. Perlman's (1969) *Worker-Student Action Committees France May '68*.

ultra-left influenced groups<sup>148</sup> like the Situationist International (SI) and Socialism or Barbarism (S ou B), and its successor organizations such as ICO.<sup>149</sup>

In the wake of '68, there was a surge of interest in the ultra-left. With the SI not taking new members, and busy expelling the ones they had,<sup>150</sup> it was ICO that attracted a large part of the new influx. It expanded massively to become the largest ultra-left group in France, with a few hundred members. It had links with many local 'councilist' groups that emerged across France, one of the more significant of which was the one TC emerged from - the Marseilles-based Cahiers du Communisme de Conseils (Notebooks on Council Communism).

However, the adequacy of the council communist perspective was increasingly questioned by individuals and groups<sup>151</sup> appropriating

---

148 That such modern ultra-left currents existed in France was partly a product of the fact that exiles from both wings had taken up residence there in the '20s and '30s. Indeed, the Italian left exiles group Bilan had done considerable theoretical work. See Bourrinet's *The Italian Left* and *The Dutch-German Left*, op. cit.

149 Informations et Correspondence Ouvrières (Workers' News and Correspondence) developed from Informations Liasons Ouvrières (ILO) which parted from S ou B in 1958 when Castoriadis/Chalieu took the latter in a more 'Leninist' direction. (ICO, *un Point de Vue*). There is a pamphlet on it by a leading participant Henri Simon whose group *Echanges* continues the tradition. He provides a short account in *Red and Black Notes*, 5.

150 See *The Veritable Split* in the Situationist International and late documents in Ken Knabb's *Situationist International Anthology* (Bureau of Public Secrets).

151 Some examples are Camatte and *Invariance*, Dauvé and *Mouvement Communiste*, and other groups that "of which," as

ideas coming from the Italian Left and in particular its critique of self-management.<sup>152</sup> An important part of the dynamism of the French ultra-left lies in the fact that one of the main ways Bordiga and the Italian Left's ideas were introduced to France<sup>153</sup> in this period was not by traditional Left Communists but by less orthodox figures like Camatte and others around the journal *Invariance*, and by Gilles Dauvé and the group *Mouvement Communiste*. In a text that has been translated as part of *Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement*, Dauvé argues correctly that a problem with the (councilist) ultra-left is that it opposed the bureaucracy, state control and the Leninist party with another set of organizational forms - workers' democracy, self-management and the councils - missing the issue of the content of communism. If the defining politics of '68 - the social content was something else - had been 'self managementist', then the critique was a significant one.<sup>154</sup>

---

Bordiga would say, “- with great pleasure - we do not know the names and personalities”, such as *Négation* and the *Organization des Jeunes Travailleurs Révolutionnaires*, *Communism: a World without Money*.

152        These developments are described nicely in the American translator's introduction to the 'Barrot' text 'Critique of the Situationist International' in *What is Situationism?*, ed. S. Home (AK Press, 1996), pp. 53-60.

153        The collections 'Bordiga and the Passion for Communism' and 'Espece Humaine et Crout Terrestre et autres Articles' give a more interesting picture than the selection one encounters through the orthodox left communist press.

154        Another text that expresses the critique of self-management is *Négation's* *Lip and the Self-Managed Counter Revolution* (Detroit: Black and Red).

Another group TC mention, Révolution International/ICC,<sup>155</sup> are also connected to the dissatisfaction with ‘councilism’. However, it has largely rejected any new thinking as ‘modernism’ in favour of a more fundamentalist - ‘the correct positions have already been arrived at’ - Left Communism based on a select appropriation of the Dutch/German and Italian Left heritages. It managed to recruit many of the councilist groups and individuals that had sprung up in France and elsewhere on the basis of the line that revolution was imminent and it was necessary to get organized and build a left communist organization/party.

It is the less organizationally fixated and more theoretically questioning currents, of which TC are part, that are more interesting for us. As Loren Goldner puts it, debates in the French ultra-left in 1968-73 reapproached the issue of capitalism in terms of value “in order to insist, rightly, that communism was neither ‘nationalised property’ or ‘workers’ control of production’ but the positive supersession of commodity production and all its categories: value, wage labour, capital, the proletariat as a social relationship, all grasped as an integral whole.”<sup>156</sup> Informing the debates, and allowing them to transcend an ultra-left version of Second International Marxism, were the newly available texts by Marx, the Grundrisse and the ‘Results of the Immediate Process of Production’ (the ‘Missing Sixth Chapter’ of Capital). Bordiga and the circle around him, including Camatte, had been amongst the first to recognize the significance of these texts. Whatever their problems,<sup>157</sup> the strength of Camatte and others was

---

155        The International Communist Current, known in the UK through their organ *World Revolution*.

156        Goldner’s ‘Remaking of the American Working Class’, while suggesting interesting perspectives on many issues, the economic analysis Goldner attempts to ground them in is based on a fatally flawed misreading of Marx.

157        For example we can agree with TC that one would not want

that they did not take the theoretical ideas of either the Dutch/German and/or Italian Lefts, or even of Marx, as complete and finished doctrines simply needing to be propagated, but attempted to approach reality in a non-ideological way.

One example of the usefulness of a non-dogmatic taking up of the ideas of the Italian left was that the German/Dutch Left factoryist and economistic vision of self-management could be subjected to the critique of the Italian Left, but at the same time the Italian Left's conception that revolution is first of all a political act could be overturned with an idea of revolution as fundamentally neither political nor economic but social: communization - the direct negation of capitalist social relations, and in particular the enterprise form, and their replacement by human ones. If in the period up to and including May '68 the SI had been the most dynamic revolutionary tendency, an argument can be made that, in the years following, it was other tendencies more open (critically) to the Italian Left and to the newly-published texts of Marx's *Critique of Political Economy* that were at the cutting edge of theory and critique. Part of the SI's power was that they had not simply adopted council communism, but with their critique of culture and of everyday life, their practices of drift and diversion etc. had pushed and deepened the meaning of revolution. Similarly, the best French 'ultra-left' groups of the '70s, by not simply adopting a left communist ideology but using the newly available Marx to rethink what the overcoming of capitalism was, went further in a revolutionary grasping of what had been novel in the '68 events and in the new developments in the class struggle continuing to occur across

---

to follow Camatte in rejecting class. As the English publisher of the *Invariance* texts, *Capital and Community: The Results of the Immediate Process of Production and the Economic Work of Marx* writes: "it is important to understand how class has been transformed, rather than to abandon class analysis."

the advanced capitalist world. Without agreeing with every innovation of these currents, it seems clear to us that communist theory was being advanced in the French ultra-left scene not least through a questioning of the limits of 'ultra-leftism'. It is out of this milieu that TC emerge.

## THÉORIE COMMUNISTE ON OBJECTIVISM

TC place objectivism and the other issues raised by our 'Decadence' articles within a historical schema based on Marx's concepts of formal and real subsumption of labour,<sup>158</sup> and a whole set of categories which they have developed over the last thirty years. The criticisms TC make of particular sections of the 'Decadence' articles are in many cases valid - for example, our discussion of the Russian revolution and our treatment of autonomist Marxism - are intertwined with this overall perspective. Our impression is that TC are certainly asking some of the right questions.

A difficulty the reader (and those we have asked to translate for us) find is that TC express themselves in a difficult and sometimes obscure manner. They seem to insist on and repeat a number of rather abstract formulations - for example, the ideas of the mutual involvement of capital and proletariat, and of the self-presupposition of capital - in order to grasp capital and the class struggle. TC feel the idea of "mutual involvement of proletariat and capital" is missing from our articles. However while at some points the articles do not escape a separation of capital(ism) and class struggle, what certainly seems misplaced to us is TC's thinking that the weaknesses in the articles are founded on Aufheben's "preference for the concept of alienation to that of exploitation." On the contrary, we'd say that the place in the articles where the conception of 'mutual involvement' is most present is actually in our use of the category of alienation. This is something we will return to in our response to their critique.

---

158 For the distinction, see Marx's 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production', Appendix to the Penguin edition of *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 1019.

The more we read TC, the more it is evident that their categories are based on a close reading of Marx's Critique of Political Economy, and in particular of the Grundrisse and the 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production'. Part of the difficulty of TC's writing is that they move between the abstract level of the theory in the Grundrisse and a more concrete examination of the class struggle. This is not necessarily a criticism - we get much from the Grundrisse and there is nothing wrong with someone writing at that level now (even if it is likely to restrict their readership). One possibility to consider is that TC's constant return to certain abstract formulations, even at the price of their writing becoming repetitious and difficult to read, may have advantages in resisting the path of least resistance of bourgeois thought, stopping oneself slipping into the type of thought which accepts and reproduces fetishized appearances and separations.<sup>159</sup> So while TC's abstract theory is undoubtedly difficult, one might say any attempt to understand the complex processes of history will be difficult, as is Marx's. One must deal with problems at the level of

---

159      Bourgeois thought is not just the thought of the bourgeoisie or other supporters of capitalism; rather it is the categories of thought which express correctly the real appearances of capitalist social forms but do not grasp them as appearances, instead taking these categories positively, affirmatively. Just as the appearance of capital as things (money, machines etc.) and us as separate bourgeois individuals is a real moment produced through capitalist social relations but covering the real flow of life captured as the process of value - alienated labour - our attempts to grasp this world generally reproduce rigid categories of separate subject and object and do not get behind the appearances. The difficulty of TC's writing may we think be a consequence their attempt to resist slipping into fetishized forms of thought which Marxism, as an positivistic ideology based on Marx's insights but distorted back into bourgeois limits, has so often fallen into.

difficulty which they demand. However, a merit of Marx's abstractions is that they move, they allow a grasp of reality and open it up - do TC's? Marx's abstract level of theorizing was usually accompanied by texts in which he made every effort to be comprehensible, to present the practical implications, as he saw it, of his more theoretical work back to the real movement, which he, like TC, would see as the actual origin of his theory. Likewise, TC have interesting things to say about the class struggle, both in the past and with recent developments, which they describe as 'radical democratism' and the 'direct action movement'.

Below we present TC's account of their history and perspective, followed by our own summary of the main thrust of the 'Decadence' articles, which serves as a preface to TC's critique.

### **THÉORIE COMMUNISTE: BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVE**

The first issue of the review *Théorie Communiste* (TC) came out in 1977. The original group involved had got together in 1975. Previously some of the members of this group had published the review *Intervention Communiste* (two issues appeared in '72 and '73) and had participated in the publication *Cahiers du Communisme de Conseils* - Notebooks on Council Communism. Edited in Marseilles between '68 and '73, this publication was very much linked to ICO (*Informations et Correspondance Ouvrière* - Workers' News and Correspondence, which has since become *Echanges et Mouvement* - Exchanges and Movement). The group separated from *Cahiers du Communisme de Conseils* as soon as it started to fuse with *Révolution Internationale* (the International Communist Current). The brief history which follows allows us, in part, to get to grips with the problems and questions which existed at the origin of TC.

At the beginning of the '70s a whole tendency already critical of the historic ultra-left began to find aspects of the ultra-left's analysis inadequate, in particular their critique of all the political and union mediations which give form to the proletariat's belonging, as a class, to the capitalist mode



of production. In the balance sheet that we can draw up of the wave of class struggle at the end of the '60s, the call for class action in itself masks the essential problem: it is not a question of rediscovering a pure assertion of the proletariat. The revolution, the abolition of capital, will be the immediate negation of all classes, including the proletariat. Yet we didn't want to adopt the approach of Invariance who, from this observation, ended up rejecting any classist perspective on the contradictions of existing society and the revolution, nor that of Mouvement Communiste, led by Jean Barrot, who, by an injection of Bordigism, sought to radicalize the ultra-left problematic.

At first the theoretical work of TC (in cooperation with the group who published *Négation*) consisted of elaborating the concept of programmatism. The crisis at the end of the '60s/beginning of the '70s was the first crisis of capital during the real subsumption of labour under capital. It marked the end of all the previous cycles which, since the beginning of the 19th Century, had for their immediate content and for their objective the increase in strength of the class within the capitalist mode of production and its affirmation as the class of productive work, through the taking of power and the putting in place of a period of transition. Practically and theoretically, programmatism designates the whole of that period of the class struggle of the proletariat. Despite having renewed this problematic out of necessity, *Echanges* (published in English and French) remains on the same general basis, namely that in each struggle the proletariat must rediscover itself; revolution becomes the process of struggles, the process of this conquest of itself.

The central theoretical question thus becomes: how can the proletariat, acting strictly as a class of this mode of production, in its contradiction with capital within the capitalist mode of production, abolish classes, and therefore itself, that is to say: produce communism? A response to this question which refers to some kind of humanity underneath the

proletarian or to human activity underneath work, not only traps itself in a philosophical quagmire, but always returns to the consideration that the class struggle of the proletariat can only go beyond itself in so far as it already expresses something which exceeds and affirms itself (we can find this even in the present theoretical formalisations of the 'direct action movement'). The sweaty labourer has been replaced by Man, but the problem has not changed, which remains that of 'Aufhebung'.

Starting from this basis, we have undertaken a work of theoretical redefinition of the contradiction between the proletariat and capital. In the first place it was necessary to redefine the contradiction as being simultaneously the contradiction bearing communism as its resolution and the reproductive and dynamic contradiction of capital. It was necessary to produce the identity of the proletariat as a class of the capitalist mode of production and as a revolutionary class, which implies that we no longer conceive this 'revolutionariness' as a class nature which adjusts itself, disappears, is reborn, according to circumstances and conditions. This contradiction is exploitation. With exploitation as a contradiction between the classes we grasped their characterisation as the characterisation of the community, therefore as being simultaneously their reciprocal involvement. This meant that we were able to grasp: the impossibility of the affirmation of the proletariat; the contradiction between the proletariat and capital as history; the critique of any revolutionary nature of the proletariat as a defining essence buried or masked by the reproduction of the whole (the self-presupposition of capital). We had historicized the contradiction and therefore the revolution and communism, and not only their circumstances. The revolution and communism are what is produced historically through the cycles of struggles which accentuate the development of the contradiction. The contradiction between the proletariat and capital was really disobjectified, without taking the economy to be an illusion. The tendential fall in the rate of profit became immediately

a contradiction between classes and not that which triggers it, as always remained the case with Mattick, even though his theory of crises opens the way to the supersession of objectivism.

In addition to the deepening of these theoretical presuppositions, the work of TC consists of defining the structure and content of the contradiction between classes at work since the end of the '70s, and consolidated in the '80s. There was a restructuring of the relations of exploitation, that is to say of the contradiction between classes, which was the second phase of real subsumption.

The extraction of relative surplus has become a process of reproduction of the interface between capital and labour which is adequate to it in that it contains no element, no point of crystallisation, no sticking point which can be a hindrance to the necessary fluidity and constant overturning which it needs. Against the previous cycle of struggles, restructuring has abolished all specificity, guarantees, 'welfare', 'Fordian compromise', division of the global cycle into national areas of accumulation, into fixed relations between the centre and the periphery, into internal zones of accumulation (East/West). The extraction of surplus value in its relative mode demands constant upheaval and the abolition of all restrictions to the immediate process of production, the reproduction of labour power and the relations of capitals with each other.

The restructuring of the capitalist mode of production cannot exist without a workers' defeat. This defeat was that of the worker's identity, of the Communist parties, of 'actually existing socialism', of trade unionism, of self-management, of self-organisation. It is a whole cycle of struggles in its diversity and its contradictions which was defeated in the '70s and early '80s. Restructuring is essentially counter-revolution. Its essential result, since the beginning of the '80s, is the disappearance of any productive worker's identity reproduced and confirmed within the capitalist mode of production.

When the contradictory relation between the proletariat and capital is no longer defined in the fluidity of capitalist reproduction, the proletariat can only oppose itself to capital by calling into question the movement in which it is itself reproduced as a class. The proletariat no longer carries a project of social reorganisation as an affirmation of what it is. In contradiction with capital, it is, in the dynamic of the class struggle, in contradiction with its own existence as a class. This is now the content of, and what is at stake in, the class struggle. It is the basis of our present work through analyses not only of the course of capital but also, indissociably, of struggles such as that of December '95 in France, of the movement of the unemployed or the *sans-papiers*,<sup>160</sup> as well as everyday struggles which are less spectacular but, even so, indicative of this new cycle.

That which is fundamentally radical about the cycle of struggles is simultaneously its limit: the existence of the class in the reproduction of capital. This limit which is specific to the new cycle of struggles is the foundation and the historically specific content of what from 1995 we have called 'radical democratism'. It is the expression and the formalisation of the limits of this cycle of struggles. It sets up in political practice or in an alternativist perspective the disappearance of any worker's identity so as to ratify the existence of the class within capital as a collection of citizens and/or producers, an existence to which it asks capital to conform. In opposition to this, but on the same basis, the 'direct action movement' thinks of itself as already being new 'disalienated' social relations opposed to capital.

Starting out from this cycle of struggles, revolution is a supersession produced by it. There cannot be an extension of present struggles as they are in themselves to revolution for the simple reason that revolution is the abolition of classes. This supersession is the moment when, in the class

---

160 (Translators' note:) Immigrants without legal documentation.

struggle, class belonging itself becomes an exterior constraint imposed by capital. It is a contradictory process internal to the capitalist mode of production. In the meantime, neither orphans of the labour movement, nor prophets of the communism to come, we participate in the class struggle as it is on a daily basis and as it produces theory.

### **DECADENCE: THE THEORY OF DECLINE OR THE DECLINE OF THEORY (REPRISE)**

The main TC text which follows below is, as its title suggests, critical comments which they made to accompany their translation of the decadence articles from *Aufheben* issues 2-4. For readers who have not seen the texts or perhaps wish to be reminded we will give a summary here.

In order to deal with the theory of decadence or decline it was necessary to consider a great deal of material - conceptions of capitalist crisis and collapse, the evolution of transitory forms, the necessity or otherwise of socialism - which have dominated attempts at the revolutionary analysis of twentieth-century capitalism. The underlying theme we identified (and one that attracted TC's interest) was the issue of objectivism. Under this term, we analysed a prevalent form of understanding dominated by the separation of the objective and the subjective - capitalist development and the class struggle - the posing of capitalism as, so to speak, a machine with an inexorable objective (mechanical?) logic heading towards its collapse, generating a subjective response in the necessity of the class struggle moving towards socialist revolution. In this conception, the driving force towards communism, its material basis, was seen as the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production understood as a fundamental underlying objective reality to which socialist revolution would be an inevitable consequence (with a collapse into barbarism sometimes suggested as the only other possibility). Based on such a conception, the central problem of revolution tended to be reduced to one way or other of having consciousness and subjectivity catch up with

the objective situation, with the crisis playing a key role. Objectivism could be expressed politically in opposite ways; as Trotsky's reduction of everything to the crisis of leadership, with the revolutionary task reduced to tactical questions of organizing the vanguard or party to take advantage of the crisis that would surely come; or, as with Mattick and 'councilism', be seen in a totally non-vanguardist way with revolution a spontaneous working class reaction to the crisis. We traced the origin of such theorizing to the 'classical Marxism' developed by Engels and the Second International of which Trotskyism and 'left-communism' or the 'ultra-left' claimed to be the true continuations. We saw how these theories seemed to be undermined by the failure of capitalism to collapse or produce a revolution after WW2. In the second article in the series, we then addressed the heterodox currents; like Socialism or Barbarism, the Situationists and the autonomist Marxists, which emerged at this point and who questioned the objectivist decline problematic and asserted the crucial importance of the revolutionary subject in the overthrow of capitalism. But we also noted how the return of crisis itself in the '70s seemed to renew the necessity of understanding crisis - objectivistically or otherwise. We finished with a consideration of the approach adopted by the Radical Chains magazine which focused on the role of state interventions like welfare as the 'prevention of communism', and we ended with (a rather too brief) suggestion of an alternative perspective.

We now turn, then, to TC's response to our 'Decadence' articles.

### **AUFHEBEN'S 'DECADENCE': A RESPONSE<sup>161</sup>**

It goes without saying that for us to undertake what represented a considerable task for us, a translation intended for publication of the three-part Aufheben article on objectivism and the 'theories of decadence', we consider this text of great interest. Beyond the listing of a huge mass

161 (Translator's note:) 'A propos du texte 'Sur la décadence de Aufheben' appeared (in French) in *Théorie Communiste*, 15.

of documentation and the construction of a history of the concept of objectivism, this interest lies in the underlying critical point of view on this history and the perspectives it opens for a current theoretical production.

This point-of-view can be summed up in four quotations:

“For us, the market or law of value is not the essence of capital; its essence is rather the self-expansion of value: that is, of alienated labour.”

“Autonomist theory in general and the theory of crisis as class struggle in particular did essential work on the critique of the reified categories of objectivist Marxism. It allows us to see them ‘as modes of existence of the class struggle’ [TC emphasis]. If at times they overstate this, failing to see the real extent to which the categories have an objective life as aspects of capital, it remains necessary to maintain the importance of the inversion.”

“The object of the law of value is not products but the working class (...) its existence outside it.”<sup>162</sup>

“Marx established how the predominant class system and the class struggle act through the commodity, wage labour, etc.” [Editors’ note: Our actual words were: “Marx analysed how the system of class rule and class struggle operates through the commodity, wage labour etc.”]

These formulations could very well be ours.

It is rare that theoretical works attend to this essential problem of objectivism without descending into the worst deranged subjectivist imaginings or without simply abandoning a theory of classes, of their contradiction and of communism as the supersession of this contradiction. However (fortunately there are always ‘however’s’), we have a series of

---

162 To be fair, this point is from a place in the text where we are explaining and acknowledging good points in Radical Chains’ perspective.

critical comments to formulate on this text, comments which we are ready to discuss.

The basis of these comments is the absence, despite the quotations above, of the conception of a mutual involvement between proletariat and capital as defining their contradiction. As we show in the piece on objectivism (TC 15), the question here is of determining the concept of exploitation, to which *Aufheben* seems to prefer that of alienation, which upholds the exteriority between the 'alienated subject' and its 'essence' outside itself. The absence of this conception of the contradiction between the proletariat and capital as mutual involvement, the preference for the concept of alienation, leads to affirmations which we absolutely cannot share, such as the following: "for us, the revolution is the return of the subject to herself...". Without the production of the contradiction between classes as mutual involvement, we necessarily remain within the perspective of the revolution as affirmation, as the triumph of the proletariat; to this perspective we counterpose the revolution as the abolition of the proletariat in the abolition of capital, within the movement where "the defence of its interests" leads the proletariat to consider its definition as a class to be an external constraint. "The return of the subject to herself/itself" doesn't really transcend the contradiction, or its terms, but it simply represents the return of the subject to itself (this smacks of teleology). Even the title of the journal '*Aufheben*' raises this whole question.

From then on, one has the tendency when reading the text to understand the supersession of the capitalist mode of production as something rather formal. For example, the Bolsheviks are 'reproached' for planning 'from above'. According to this view the Bolsheviks developed capitalism because of the forms they decided to adopt for the labour process: one-man management, bourgeois specialists, Taylorism; but didn't they rather 'develop' because wage labour remained? Must we deduce that communism is planning 'from below'? Can we now maintain the Marxian



vision of communism as the “free association of the producers”, in the real subsumption of labour to capital (assuming that the passage of Capital on the commodity deals with communist society). This would mean that we limit ourselves to the forms of organization of production, which the article denounces with a concise and effective formula: “Communism is a content - the abolition of wage labour - not a form.”

The critique of the Bolshevik counter-revolution remains formal, in the sense that it is not related to the content of the revolution in this historic phase of the contradiction between the proletariat and capital, a phase in which the revolution could only lead to the rising strength of the class within capital and its affirmation as a dominant pole of society. The Bolshevik counter-revolution then necessarily articulates itself with the revolution. The Lefts, even the Dutch/German Left, never grasped the true nature of the Russian Revolution: a revolution whose content was the autonomous affirmation of the class and which found, in labour’s claim to be able to manage society, that is, in labour’s very strength within capital in the transition to real subsumption, the revolution’s own limitation turned against itself. The parties of the Second International were in a position to take charge of and formalize this counter-revolution to differing degrees according to their specific situations. The revolution as affirmation of the class transforms itself relentlessly into the management of capital, turning into counter-revolution; revolution provides counter-revolution with its own content. In ‘The Unknown Revolution’, Voline relates a ‘little scene’ he witnessed. In a factory, the workers had started to organize their transactions with other firms themselves. A representative of Bolshevik authority arrives, and, using threats, orders the end of this type of activity, because the state is undertaking it. Of course, this did not go without confrontation, without opposition, but is it possible to imagine an exchange which would not take a form alienated from the exchangers connected by it?

The absence of the mutual involvement between proletariat and capital in their contradiction, in our reading of this article, very often gives us the impression that we are dealing with a communist project that is unvarying, but subject to the objective conditions which, after having as it were been chased out through the front door, have the tendency to return through the back door. Hence the presentation of objectivism or of economic determinism as ‘errors’, as ‘deviations’, and the incapacity of the article really to go beyond a history of ideas. There is the proletariat, there is capital. The latter evolved, the former experiencing this evolution as ‘class composition’. But the evolution of these terms isn’t understood as the history of their relationship. They are in contradiction, but this contradiction is only a mutual, reflexive relation and not a self-differentiating totality. Thus history is understood as the history of capital, subject to the constraint of working class struggle, but not as that of the contradiction between the proletariat and capital. Therefore the revolution and communism cannot really be historicized. It’s no use adding on a subjective approach from the working class viewpoint. The point of view has changed, but the problematic of objectivity has not been superseded. This is what the article glimpses when the subject is workerism, of which it doesn’t manage to formulate a critique other than economic.

If one considers the central problem of objectivism, its critique begins with the production of a theory in which we grasp exploitation and the falling rate of profit as the contradiction between proletariat and capital, and not merely as the development of capital; the central concepts are those of exploitation and accumulation. As long as the revolution could only present itself as the affirmation of the proletariat (formal subsumption, first phase of real subsumption), the contradiction of the capitalist mode of production as dependent on the mutual involvement between proletariat and capital was unimaginable, because then the negation of capital could only be, ipso facto, the negation of the proletariat. And so the revolution

as formal subsumption of labour to capital and in the first phase of its real subsumption, as affirmation of the proletariat, becomes inevitably an economism. If the revolution is the affirmation of the class, in making revolution, the proletariat must necessarily resolve a contradiction of capitalism of which it is not one of the limits but simply the best placed executant, so that the supersession of this contradiction, far from being the proletariat's own disappearance, becomes its triumph. The strategy based on 'proletarian subjectivity' doesn't go beyond this problematic.

As a pole in the contradiction within the capitalist mode of production, the proletariat's existence and practice can only match the historical course of its contradiction with capital as exploitation and the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. This is the whole importance of the crisis theory of Mattick, which in its objectivism, can't be used as it is, and must be criticized from our point of view. It is fundamental to keep an analysis of the crisis on the basis of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. The law of the falling rate of profit only needs to be deobjectified, "dereified" as the article says. When we read in the article: "it (capital) creates a limit to its accumulation in the fact that it can only produce for the market.", even if it goes on to say: "capital constantly revolutionizes relations of production in order to permit their continual expansion. This need constantly to transform social relations means that capital is constantly driven to confront the working class", and the matter is ended with: "it is possible that the crisis creates the conditions in which the proletariat begins to oppose its interests to those of capital.", we are led to believe that:

- 1) The crisis is situated at the level of the market,
- 2) The strategy of capital is the development of the productive forces,
- 3) The revolutionary driving force of the proletariat is the defence of its interests.

On one side the crisis, on the other the class struggle; a meeting of divergent interests shaping capital's path, but the development of capital and the crisis are not understood in themselves as class struggle.

As the article fully shows in its key developments, the theoretical bedrock of objectivism lies in the separation between the class struggle and the development of the capitalist mode of production. But the basis of this theoretical separation is the impossibility of the proletariat itself, in this whole formal subsumption period of class struggle, and even under certain current forms, of being an element of the contradiction to be overturned. It is only the contradiction's downtrodden extremity and only has the role of gravedigger. Capitalism is only understood as a set of conditions, evolving towards an optimal situation with regard to an essential and immutable revolutionary nature of the proletariat, even if historically this nature fails to manifest itself. The critique of objectivism cannot only be the critique of the separation between class struggle and capitalist development, it can only be achieved in the critique of the concept of the revolutionary nature of the proletariat, as determined once and for all, and adjusting itself according to conditions. The proletariat is only revolutionary in the contradiction which opposes it to capital. In that case, it is not a nature which is determined, but a relation and a history. As long as a revolutionary being of the proletariat is presupposed, against this being conditions are necessary, which are necessarily objective conditions. As long as there is no critique of this conception of the revolutionary nature of the proletariat, there is no way out of the objectivist problematic. As long as this critique has not been made, it is impossible to go beyond the point of view governed by a dichotomy between class struggles and economic contradictions, which are only connected by relations of mutual determination.

It is in realizing the limits of workerism and in distancing themselves from it, that there is a sense that *Aufheben* are confronted by this problem.

The article expresses well that there's a limit in considering the class struggle as the clash of two strategies in the workerist conception, but without explicitly putting forward the mutual involvement between the classes as defining their contradiction. Workerism only makes an inversion of objectivism, without going beyond it, it only adds a subjective aspect such as Negri's working class 'self-valorisation' which tags on an additional determination in the relation between proletariat and capital, but one that doesn't change the conception of this relation. Having a sum of determinations, it is thought that the totality of this relation has been reached, but the relation has not been deobjectified, a subjective determination has just been added in opposition to the objective. *Aufheben* reproaches the workerists for not doing enough to preserve the objectivity of the reproduction of capital and for merely declaring that "everything is class struggle". Not managing to grasp objectivity and economy as a necessary moment in the reproduction of the contradiction between capital and the proletariat, *Aufheben* ends up with a sort of position of mitigation: you must deobjectify the contradiction between capital and the proletariat, but keep aside a little objectivity, above all for periods of counter-revolution. Objectivism has only been surpassed from the point of view of the proletariat and preserved as the reality of capitalism. The critique was not a deconstruction of objectivity and its reconstruction as economy, as necessary moment of relation between classes, it was only the same thing seen from another viewpoint. On this subject, the question of the 'incompleteness' of Capital is particularly futile. What can be deemed Marx's opinion on the wage as class struggle in *Wages, Price and Profit* or in 'Speech on Free Trade', allows no doubt to hang over the fact that the struggle 'for' (and even 'over': Negri) the wage, will never result in anything but the wage. As for 'small circulation' as a space for workers' control, this is a product of that 'optimism' among the workerists, as evoked by the article, which is now foundering even in the reformist political arena.

Paradoxically, the addition of a subjective side, a ‘working class point of view’, only serves to confirm, to reinforce, the objectivism which has been renounced as something that is to be dismantled. It merely adds an ‘active’ supplement to it.

In the same manner, from the side of the understanding of the actions of the capitalist class, the idea still lingers that the maintenance and the reproduction of the social relation of exploitation depends on other types of relations from those that it brings into play to reproduce itself and which presuppose itself. While criticising Radical Chains, the article presents the following analysis: “the idea of a perfect regulation of needs under the law of value is a myth. The law of value and capital have always been constrained first by forms of landed property and of community which preceded it, and then by the class struggle growing up within it. Capital is compelled to relate to the working class by other means than the wage, and the state is its necessary way of doing this. The Poor Law expressed one strategy for controlling the working class: administration expresses a different one. Once we consider the law of value as always constrained, then the idea of its partial suspension loses its resonance.” And we would be tempted to add: it is the very idea that capital relates to the working class by other means than the value, the wage etc., which loses all resonance.

If indeed it is accurate that being “always constrained” forms part of the definition, then the state, its civil services, its army and police, are attributes of value, of wages and exploitation. As the article says, it is not enough merely to remain with the most abstract presentation of value at the beginning of Capital, it is necessary to consider value in its application. Through the state, capital does not relate to the working class through other means than wages.

If the self-presupposition [l’autoprésupposition] of capital-in-general is considered, the transformation of surplus product into surplus value then into additional capital can never taken for granted because of the very laws

of capital (that is falling rate of profit, and constraint on the exploitation of labour power). In this moment of self-presupposition, the activity of the capitalist class always consists of throwing the proletariat back into a situation of exploitation (through political action, violence, bankruptcies, lay-offs, etc.). We have not got out of an analysis of the self-presupposition of capital and we have the relation between the proletariat and the capitalist class as specific and contradictory activities. The danger would lie in the autonomisation of the poles of the contradiction of the capitalist mode of production, the proletariat and capital, into two strategies.

For us, objectivism is linked to two sets of causes: the first lie in an epoch of class struggle which poses revolution and communism as affirmation of the proletariat and therefore excludes the latter from the field of contradictions of the mode of production. Secondly, the proletariat only takes advantage of 'economic' contradictions of which it is supposedly not one of the components.

A constant of the reproduction of capital that we call its self-presupposition is the very basis of economic reality: all the terms of the reproduction of society reappear as 'objectivized' conditions of reproduction on the side of capital at the end of each cycle.

The result of this is that the concept and critique of objectivism cannot serve as a conductor for an analysis of the problems of developing 'theory'. The decisive break in 'theory' cuts through both objectivism and the theories taking its critique on board. The line of fracture and discrimination in the development of theory is located between the class struggle bringing the abolition of capital as affirmation of the proletariat and the class struggle bringing the proletariat's own abolition in the abolition of capital, that is the very content of the transition from formal subsumption to real subsumption and of the latter's history. If we do not start from this basis, then one has the impression that 'theory' has a history. In the absence of this historical critique which says why the revolution is at a particular

moment in time determinist, economist, objectivist, the internal critique of which the article has so much trouble getting rid, suffers from only considering objectivism as a theoretical 'error' or 'deviation', or even as determined by 'objective' conditions.

"As Pannekoek pointed out, the real decline of capitalism is the self-emancipation of the working class". This is the conclusion of the affected critical brushing aside realised in the text, but here one is at the beginning of the essential problem: what is the contradiction between the proletariat and capital, as epoch of the capitalist mode of production, which brings about communism? As the article states well, it is not a question of defining "the level of development of the productive forces incompatible with capitalist relations of production", but rather of historically defining the content and the structure of a contradiction between classes. It is true that this was not the subject of the article, but reading it makes us wish that this were the subject of its conclusion. We remain a little dissatisfied to read: "from time to time, the relation between capitalist development and the class reaches a point of possible rupture. Revolutionaries and the class take their chance; if the wave fails to go beyond capital, capital continues to a higher level."

The whole history of this mode of production is yet to be written as history of the contradiction between classes. Can we remain with the vision presented in the article of a succession of revolutionary onslaughts never victorious so far, always defeated, and understand their defeat as being down either to exterior (objective) conditions, or the force of counter-revolution, unrelated to the historical nature of the contradiction between the proletariat and capital, which is revealed as much in the revolution as in the counter-revolution? This is a vision which returns inexorably to a revolutionary essence of the proletariat, identical in each successive onslaught. The "organic relation between class struggle and capitalist development", which forms the very bedrock of this whole



article, is not the relation of reciprocal determinations of two elements defined a priori in themselves. It is really an organic relation and in that the particularisation of a concrete totality which only exists in the parties and their mutual demands. The contradiction between the proletariat and capital is the development of capital.

## The Debate – Part 2

# Communist Theory: Beyond the Ultra-Left: A reply to TC

### INTRODUCTION

In the last issue, we published a presentation and critique of *Aufheben*'s decadence articles<sup>163</sup> by the French group *Théorie Communiste* (TC). To help make sense of it, we also outlined the importance of the ultra left<sup>164</sup> its development in France. Like many others, *Aufheben* has both acknowledged the influence of, and distanced itself from, the ultra-left. In general, however, *Aufheben* has made criticisms only in passing. Perhaps in the course of dealing with a particular struggle we have looked at what we see as the rigid and ideological point of view taken by 'partyist' but not only 'partyist' tendencies of the ultra-left. Such targets are perhaps all too easy to distinguish oneself from.

For TC, an attempt to critique and go beyond the theory of the ultra left has been a central focus. They have made a critique of the more theoretically dynamic tendencies which have sprung up (largely in France), trying to identify and question the theoretical assumptions behind their positions. The anglophone countries have not developed much of a distinct ultra left theory. TC's ideas overlap here more with some of the more interesting developments in academic Marxism such as 'Open

---

163 See *Aufheben* issues 2-4.

164 The attraction/repulsion of the label "ultra left" has been a subject of many an *Aufheben* footnote. In this article we use 'ultra left', as TC do, descriptively and not pejoratively, in a broad sense to include the historic ultra-left of the German Dutch and Italian Left communists and more modern groups and individuals influenced by them.

Marxism'<sup>165</sup> and Moishe Postone.<sup>166</sup> What is interesting is that many of these academics coming from a high theoretical engagement with Marx, when it comes to practical political conclusions of their work, move to a rejection of the traditional forms of leftism, generally accepted by their colleagues, towards the problematic of the ultra left.<sup>167</sup>

TC come at the issue the other way through an engagement with and dissatisfaction with some of the answers of the ultra left towards a radical engagement with the abstractions of Marxian theory. The title of this journal has always been an injunction to take theory forward, to go beyond existing theoretical positions; we think TC are clearly making an

---

165 The use of the term 'Open Marxism' is an attempt to identify and develop a non-dogmatic critical and dialectical tradition of Marxism. For examples see Open Marxism volumes I, II & III (Pluto Press), John Holloway's *Change the World Without taking Power* (Pluto Press) and also *Revolutionary Writing* (Autonomedia) the recent republishing of articles from the journal *Common Sense*.

166 Moishe Postone's big argument is that what the problem of the traditional Marxism of the workers movement has been that it has been a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labour, which is to say a theory of the realization of the proletariat when what is actually needed - and Marx provides - is a critique of labour in capitalism, that is a theory of the material abolition of the proletariat. See *Time Labor and Social Domination* (Cambridge University Press).

167 A main example is the most practically oriented Open Marxist collection *What is to be Done?* (Avebury) which includes alongside the contributions of the academics the veteran council communist Cajo Brendel. Postone is less explicit about the political implications of his work but is being embraced by some of those interested in the situationists.

effort to do this, one that should be taken seriously. Moreover TC are an invitation to us to 'auftheben' our own positions.

'Programmatism', 'rejection of a revolutionary essence of the proletariat', 'self-presupposition of capital', 'mutual involvement of capital and proletariat', 'cycles of struggle', "first and second stage of real subsumption", 'restructuring', 'revolution not as the quantitative growth (transcrossover) of immediate struggles but as their produced overcoming':<sup>168</sup> the reader of TC encounters a bewildering number of specialized terms some their own, others being used in their own specific way. For those not reading French the problem of the obscurity, that even most French readers find in TC, is compounded as the available English translations<sup>169</sup> largely have the character of dense summaries of their theoretical positions. Without being able to read the process of development and analysis that grounds these positions, they can come across as a series of questionable assertions. With TC the devil is surely in the detail and without this detail we are thus not going to come to a definitive judgement on their positions. This problem of language preventing us studying TC's writings in depth is a major obstacle. However in trying to make sense of the material we have

---

168 'Transcrossover' or overgrowing is a term Trotsky used to describe the way he thought the bourgeois revolution in Russia or other less developed areas could grow into the proletarian revolution, an analysis that has not been borne out by experience. TC use it also to refer to the more general idea that the everyday class struggle, wage struggles defence of jobs etc. can simply generalize into revolutionary struggle. This conception is for them part and parcel of programmatism.

169 <http://www.geocities.com/theocommunist/> (available in the Web Archive, the current website is the <https://sites.google.com/site/theoriecommuniste/>)

access to - in part through reference to a common source in Marx - we will hopefully throw some light on the issues at stake.

What follows then is part of our unfinished process of attempting to engage with and understand TC - a sort of public auto-didacticism.

### **MEA CULPA?**

The essential points of TC's critique of the decadence articles can be summed up as follows: through a lack of the correct framework namely 'a conception of the contradiction of capital and proletariat as mutual involvement' the articles fail to escape a separation of capital(ism) and class struggle; communism and revolution are not historicized but seen to emerge from an essential invariant revolutionary essence of the proletariat - its affirmation rather than its negation. This is demonstrated in our use of the concept of alienation rather than exploitation. This leads to a formal treatment of the Russian Revolution; an inadequate attempt at a crisis theory; an incomplete critique of autonomist Marxism; and a false dichotomy of state and capital. In sum we don't escape the objectivism/subjectivism problematic.

If TC think we are right to identify 'objectivism' as the key theoretical point behind the issues we deal with, they think we mistakingly grasp it as an ahistorical error rather than, as they do, something produced historically and necessarily by a phase of the class struggle. Let us first acknowledge that much of TC's critique hits home. Looking back at the decadence articles, one is all too aware of their weaknesses. If one was to write an article on the same subject now, one would produce something different. Thus we can accept TC's basic judgment that, while the articles deal with important issues, they fail to really make the breakthrough they wished for.

Further on we will treat of some of the specific criticisms of the articles, but what is most important is the way that TC identify the weaknesses in the article from their own theoretical perspective which would appear to grasp the issues more coherently. But what exactly is this theoretical

perspective? Below we will briefly register some of the wider significance of TC's work and in particular their critique of the 'ultra left problematic'. We will then take up two issues on which we see disagreement. One is their apparent rejection of alienation in favour of exploitation. We will show that alienation is key to the whole of Marx's Critique of Political Economy (CPE), and is implied in the very concepts TC use. Two we will pose some questions concerning their periodisation of capitalism which we have problems with. We will then return to some specific points they made in their critique of the decadence articles.

## AN AMBITIOUS THEORY

TC have recently produced a book summing up their theoretical positions and development - *Critical foundations for a theory of the revolution ; beyond the affirmation of the proletariat*.<sup>170</sup> At 722 pages and still only volume 1 in a four volume series on the Theory of Communism, the ambition of their project is shown in the following plan for the four volumes: Volume one (the one already published): critical foundations for a theory of the revolution; beyond the affirmation of the proletariat. Volume two : The contradiction between the proletariat and capital ; form and content of the contradiction; the cycles of struggles; the history of the contradiction. Volume three: The restructuring of capital; formation and historical significance of capital; crises — restructurings ; current relations between the classes. Volume four: New cycle of struggles — revolution — communism — *olé!*<sup>171</sup>

170 Fondements critiques d'une théorie de la révolution - au-delà de l'affirmation du prolétariat - Roland Simon. Available from Editions Senonevero at <http://ca.geocities.com/senonevero/>

171 For TC the Italian Left who "never reached a point or rupture as productive of interrogations and supersessions" as the German Dutch Left. They acknowledge the Italian Left for its critique of self-

However for those like us only able to read English the most comprehensive statement of TC's positions available is probably the text from TC14,<sup>172</sup> which is a more detailed introduction to their ideas than the one we carried in the last *Aufheben*. 'Written for a group of "young Lyonnais"' carrying out a "theoretical reflection on the German and Italian Lefts" it focuses on the historical significance of the German Dutch Left. Unlike those seeking to claim in history a thin red line of historical antecedents for their own revolutionary authenticity, TC state: 'To align oneself with this 'heritage' does not mean repeating this or that invariant position of the KAPD or AAUD, or of theoreticians such as Gorter, Pannekoek or Rithle. Nor does it mean just taking the best from the ensemble of positions; the importance is the theoretical system, the problematic.' For TC the problematic of the German Dutch Left as the cutting edge of the German Revolution was the struggle against the "integration of the reproduction of the working class in capital's own cycle"; and of the revolution as the practical critique of the mediating

---

management and accept that as Camatte argues in his collection *Bordiga et la Passion du Communisme* there may in Bordiga be a certain 'clandestine' discourse in contrast to the official discourse of the Italian Left. However for TC the Italian Left 'remained in a critique of mediations not in themselves, as mediations, but from a formal perspective. They knew the forms of these mediations only as forms and criticized them as such (mass party, united front, anti- fascism). They wanted the mediations (party, union, period of transition, workers state) of the empowerment of the class in the capitalist mode of production and its affirmation, without the expression of the existence of the class as class of this mode of production (cf. the debates of Bilan on syndicalism and even on the existence of the proletariat).."

172 Available as a pamphlet simply called *Communist Theory*, it is on the web at <http://libcom.org/library/theorie-communiste-0>

forms - "syndicalism, mass party, united front, parliamentarism" - that had developed working class power within capital but were now seen to bind the class to capital. In the name of the class the ultra left attacked all the existing organisations of the class and called on workers to make the break. For TC this position (especially after the failure of the German revolution) can be summed up as criticising the existence of the class in the name of the revolutionary being or essence of the class.

TC's brutal honesty is to recognise that: "As real subsumption advanced (and this was the real counter- revolution in relation to the period at the beginning of the 20's) it appeared that the mediations of the existence of the class in the capitalist mode of production, far from being exterior to the 'being' of the class which must affirm itself against them, were nothing but this being in movement, in its necessary implication with the other pole of society, capital. The ultra-left arrived simultaneously, on one side at the critique of any relation between the existence of the class in the capitalist mode of production and communism, and from the other side at the affirmation of the equation of communism and the being of the class."

That is to say the position of the ultra left is a contradiction: the more it rejected and denied all forms of the non-revolutionary existence of the class the harder it became to find and hold on to a revolutionary being of the class. A central idea of TC is that the entire workers movement both in what they call the period of formal domination of capital - from the beginning of the nineteenth century up to the first world war - and in what they call the first phase of real domination - which lasts up to the 70's - is characterised by 'programmatism'. For TC the content and objective of the class struggle in this period was: "the increase in strength of the class within the capitalist mode of production and its affirmation as the class of productive labour, through the taking of power and the putting in place of a period of transition..." Despite their differences the



formal programmes of socialist, anarchist and communist organisations express essentially the same underlying content: the class affirming itself as the positive pole of society carrying the seeds of the new (socialist, anarchist or communist) society. It is basic to TC's historical perspective that there is no thin red line of proper socialists or communists, who for contingent reasons somehow lost out to the 'state capitalist' leftists. Every political tendency in the workers' movement even the ultra left were still an expression of programmatism because that was the way the capital-labour contradiction manifested in this period. The ultra left, and the left of social democracy from which it came, represented the attempt to hold on to the notion of an autonomous affirmation of the class against the mere development of the power of the class within capital which the rest of the workers' movement effectively stood for, but for TC, such a stance was bound to fail.

For TC the counter revolutionary role of the Bolsheviks in Russia and the Social Democrats in Germany lies in the fact that "the autonomous affirmation of the proletariat confronted what it was in capital, what it had become; it confronted its own class power as a class of the capitalist mode of production.... labour can then propose itself for the position of the management of capital; it can become in such a way the acute form of the counter- revolution. The revolution as affirmation of the class confronts its own negation (the counter revolution is intrinsically linked to it) in that which is its essential determination." The autonomous assertion of labour cannot suppress the economy, so labour is faced with the task of managing it.

However, while the left (including, as was seen in Spain, most anarchists) continued unproblematically to affirm the working class, the ultra-left as TC say: "suggested to us: 'revolution and communism are not the affirmation of the class as it is in the capitalist mode of production,' but it did not itself extend the consequences of this to that which it considered

to be the revolutionary nature of the proletariat, that which it always posed as separate from its 'existence'. The ultra-left functioned on that duality which would take the form: proletariat/working class. We might say 'they appeal to the proletariat because the working class lets them down!'

Rejecting this romantic notion of the revolutionary essence of the proletariat, TC's way out of this problematic is to historicize communism. TC reject (and they reproach our articles for remaining within) the conception of an unchanged communism that emerged as a possibility in 1917 to be eclipsed by the counter-revolution, to re-emerge again in '68, to be eclipsed again by the counter-revolution, to re emerge again, when? For TC there are no eternal communist truths. What arose in 1917-23 was a specific historical revolution/communism marked by the idea of the liberation of work and an affirmation of the proletariat. It was also thus an impossible communism. In this analysis TC get away from the wusual (non-)explanation for why proper revolutionary communist ideas/practice didn't win - the weight of the counter revolution - by asking why did the revolution and counter revolution take the form they did? TC refuse an explanation based on an exterior force or circumstances defeating the proletariat: the counter revolution was carried in the nature of the revolution. The ultra left pushed the understanding of communism as far as it could go within a cycle of struggle that could not escape the perspective of the affirmation of the proletariat.

### **TC: A THEORY OF DEFEAT AND OF COMING REVOLUTION**

Distinguishing themselves from some 'revolutionary thought' that emerged in the last wave of struggle, TC do not take the point of view that if 1917 was limited by the affirmation of work the struggles of the mass worker had completely escaped this by 68-73. If for both traditional leftists and ultra leftists everything has been seen through the prism of 1917, for some modern 'revolutionary' tendencies it is not 1917-23 that

is 'the turning point of history where history refused to turn' but the period around 1968-77 that has taken on this significance.

Unlike a large part of the ultra left which saw '68 as displaying a wholly new and truly communist struggle, crucially for TC the struggles of '68-77, was not a new cycle but the end of the old one. Despite all the modern features (refusal of work, critique of everyday life, etc.) for TC it was the last gasp of programmatism. TC see this even in the most advanced theoretical product of the period: the idea of the self-abolition of the proletariat expressed most prominently by the Situationists. For TC who themselves embraced the conception in the early 70s, it is a paradox suggesting that the proletariat must draw from itself a hidden essence which is to destroy itself and does not escape the limits of the class struggle. But most importantly for TC, capital's response to these struggles means that this period of programmatism is over.

TC are a political and theoretical product of the wave of struggles around '68 that made many on both sides of the barricades think that revolution was imminently on the cards in advanced capitalist countries. As this prospect receded, many on our side at first understandably didn't want to see the depth of the defeat. One of the things that distinguished TC's analysis was that they started early on to recognize the profundity of the defeat that was occurring. Key to their analysis was that the restructuring had to be grasped as a fundamental alteration in the social relations.

The restructuring was for TC the overcoming of all the obstacles posed by working class identity to the reproduction of capital. For TC the change is radical enough to justify the identification of a new stage of capitalism the 'second stage of real subsumption'.

We are not convinced about the basis of TC's periodisation, but their introduction of new phase at this time has the merit of acknowledging the profundity of the alteration that was occurring in the 70s, an alteration that many others were reluctant to deal with seeing only the crisis and

austerity measures. When they say it was a defeat of workers identity, this is a profound transformation of the social sphere. Mostly the heralds of this change have been on the side of the bourgeoisie - one can think of the advocates of postmodernism, the heralds of the 'end of the working class' and so on - and the 'revolutionary' reaction is to deny or diminish what is happening. However such denial often involves a repression of doubt, which returns in the form of an underlying pessimism and depression. Compared to the earlier period the whole terrain on which struggle was conceived has changed massively, the bastions of working class militancy have been defeated, the sense of working class community disintegrated. TC may have been one of the few groups to face from an early stage what was happening; and while not diminishing the scale of the defeat they take a surprisingly positive perspective. Rather than focus on the - subjective sense of defeat, felt acutely by 'revolutionaries', who saw better times and judge all recent movements by the standards of '68 and the last wave, they ask a more objective question - what was this defeat a defeat of - The answer — workers' identity.

In the decay of workers identity that has surely been witnessed since the seventies, leftists and most ultra leftists tend to see only a negative - that is why they are apt to deny it. For TC on the other hand workers' identity was a both a defence against the worst effects of capital and at the same time a foundation of capitalist reproduction. Thus while not denying the defeat TC see that capital in restructuring to defeat that cycle based on workers identity has prepared the basis of a new cycle of struggle where (and here we get TC's optimism) "the contradiction between the classes is henceforth situated at the level of their reproduction as classes. This level of the contradiction implies: the disappearance of all working class identity; that the existence of the proletariat as class is identical to its contradiction with capital; that the proletariat carries no project of

social reorganization based on its nature. These are the characteristics of the new cycle of struggles.”

For TC the revolution will not be when once again the working class affirms its identity but when “in the class struggle, class belonging becomes an external constraint imposed by capital.”

It seems clear to us that there is merit to TC’s arguments: particularly the brutal identification of the contradiction at the heart of the ultra left’s problematic. And crucially of course, what TC are saying is not really about a small political area and its body of theory, but about the development of capitalism/class struggle which that theory is one expression of. TC move us away from the complacent point of view that the ‘communist’ (ultra left) ideas will come into their own when the class struggle escalates by pointing to how those ideas are inadequate.

However while we can accept that to acknowledge the profundity of the change is perhaps good, we have at the same time numerous questions and doubts about it. Do they in not mourning the loss of workers identity miss the fact that perhaps the proletariat has to recognise itself and its situation to abolish itself? Can class struggle be reduced to its (self-) representation or is there perhaps a non-identical moment in existing workers struggles, as Holloway puts it ‘the communion of struggle to be not working class.’<sup>173</sup> When they characterise the present period we would want to understand much more of the detail and in particular their concrete analysis of struggles. For example when TC say “restructuring has abolished all specificity, guarantees, “welfare”, “Fordist compromise”, we wonder if they aren’t fallen into a danger in abstract theory of reifying tendencies into a achieved realities. They correctly describe the overall drift but doesn’t there remain - especially in the advanced capitalist countries - a certain level of entrenchment especially in some sectors. Ironically considering TC is a French group it would seem to be in the

---

173      Change the World Without taking power p. 144

anglo-american area that the changes TC talk about are more advanced. Surely the restructuring in Europe has been less successful and if it does have to go further for the contradiction to be posed at the level of the reproduction of classes then how far is far enough?

Another issue is that in the texts we have seen the definition of the character of the new form of struggles are very abstract. Perhaps one of the most important questions is: what concretely and positively defines this new cycle? Is it what they call 'radical democraticism', a perspective in which "there is only the promotion of democracy, of citizenship, the apology for the alternative. These practices and theories have no other horizon than that of capitalism." or as they suggest elsewhere is there something more radical at work? We know for example that TC make a great deal of the French unemployed movement of '98 however other reports of this struggle were less impressed<sup>174</sup>.

To return to the points raised in their critique of the decadence articles. As TC see it, the key theoretical issue underlying their more particular criticisms is the absence in our text of conceptions of the 'self-presupposition of capital' and of the 'mutual involvement between proletariat and capital'. This absence they say is typified by our preference for the conception of alienation to that of exploitation. Against this TC make an argument, that sounds inescapably Althusserian,<sup>175</sup> that "the question here is of determining the concept of exploitation, to which *Aufheben* seems to prefer that of alienation, which upholds the exteriority between the

---

174 See articles in *Stop the Clock!*

175 Louis Althusser was a philosopher and member of the French Communist Party whose ideas made a big impact in the 60s and 70s. For him alienation was an idealist or anthropological concept of the 'immature' Marx of the 1844 Manuscripts replaced in the mature work by 'scientific' terms such as mode of production and exploitation.

‘alienated subject’ and its ‘essence’ outside itself.” While we can accept that a problem with the article may be that it is not sufficiently informed by the concept of mutual involvement, for us this cannot be due to our use of alienation. Rather, as we see it, it is in attention to alienation that the article comes closest to the concepts such as mutual involvement that TC make so much of! As we are sure TC are aware a concept of alienation is central to Marx’s understanding of capitalism throughout his writings. In the *Grundrisse*:

it is clear, therefore, that the worker cannot become rich in this exchange, since, in exchange for his labour capacity as a fixed, available magnitude, he surrenders its creative power, like Esau his birthright for a mess of pottage. Rather, he necessarily impoverishes himself, as we shall see further on, because the creative power of his labour establishes itself as the power of capital, as an alien power confronting him. He divests himself [enttaussert sich] of labour as the force productive of wealth; capital appropriates it, as such. The separation between labour and property in the product of labour, between labour and wealth, is thus posited in this act of exchange itself. What appears paradoxical as result is already contained in the presupposition. Thus the productivity of his labour, his labour in general, in so far as it is not a capacity but a motion, real labour, comes to confront the worker as an alien power; capital, inversely, realizes itself through the appropriation of alien labour.... capital itself is essentially this displacement, this transposition, and that wage labour as such presupposes capital, so that, from its standpoint as well, capital is this transubstantiation; the necessary process of positing its own powers as alien to the worker. (*Grundrisse* p. 307-308)

Or in the 1861-63 Manuscripts:

labour thus appears to be active in the production process in such a way that it simultaneously rejects its realisation in objective conditions as an alien reality, and therefore posits itself as an insubstantial, merely necessitous labour capacity in face of this reality alienated from it, a reality not belonging to it but to others; that it posits its own reality not as a being-for-itself but as a mere being for something else, and hence also as a mere other-being or as the being of something else confronting it. (1861-63 Manuscripts MECW 34 p. 202)

Alienation for us must be grasped as the ontological inversion of subject and object at the heart of capitalist society. Within capitalist social relations, to quote Backhaus, “subject and object do not statically oppose each other, but rather are caught up in an ‘ongoing process’ of the inversion of subjectivity into objectivity, and vice versa’, a process which overall represents ‘the most general form of existence of society.’”<sup>176</sup>

An important point is that this inversion is not a one-way process requiring a simple reversal to set right. The subjectivity of labour is a much a product of capitalist objectivity, as the objectivity of capitalism is a product of subjectivity. They constitute each other. For us it is exactly alienation - this dynamic of inversion - that forms the basis of the very concepts that TC like - self-presupposition of capital<sup>177</sup> , mutual involvement,

176 He continues “There is essentially nothing enigmatic in this thought’ it is just the concretisation of the admirably lucid Marx-ian thesis that ‘circumstances make men as much as men make the circumstances’, and Kofler makes it quite plain that the ‘concept of circumstance’ is only truly comprehended by the concept of ‘relations of production.’” Backhaus [quoting Kofler] *Between Philosophy and Science in Open Marxism Vol One* p. 60

177 this term used by marx in the *Grundrisse* pp. 450-457 is close to the idea of the reproduction of capital - how it manages to repro-



subsumption of labour by capital, and even exploitation. For example the subsumption of labour by capital refers to the way that capital takes over the labour process. First its domination is formal in that it takes over the labour process as it finds it, that is as it has been developed by earlier modes of production. This formal subsumption gives way to real subsumption as capital is able to transform and revolutionize the labour process creating a specifically capitalist mode of production a form in which it never existed before.<sup>178</sup> All subsumption is an inversion, an inversion of subject and object summed up in the notion that 'Capital employs labour'.<sup>179</sup>

Already with formal subsumption the whole organisation of labour, the benefits of co-operation and the division of labour are appropriated

---

duce its preconditions out of its own process.

178        on p. 1019 of the Results: In 'the formal subsumption of labour under capital...', 'capital subsumes the labour process as it finds it, that is to say, it takes over the existing labour process, developed by different and more archaic modes of production... This stands in striking contrast to the development of a specifically capitalist mode of production (large-scale industry, etc.); the latter not only transforms the situations of the various agents of production, it also revolutionizes their actual mode of labour and the real nature of the labour process as a whole.' [p. 1021]

179        What this phrase common to everyday consciousness means is that: 'it is not worker who employs the conditions of labour it is the the conditions of labour that employ the worker.' and Marx continues 'It is precisely through this that the latter become capital, and the commodity owner who possesses them becomes a capitalist vis-a-vis the worker. this independence naturally ceases in the actual labour process, but the total labour process is a process of capital, it is incorporated into capital. To the extent that the worker figures in the process as labour, he is himself a moment of capital. (MECW 33 p. 479).

by and exist for capital, but what is going on is relatively transparent in this early stage, with real subsumption the process becomes mystified because 'The transposition of the social productivity of labour into the material attributes of capital is so firmly entrenched in people's minds that the advantages of machinery, the use of science, invention, etc. are necessarily conceived in this alienated form, so that all these things are deemed to be the attributes of capital' (p. 1058).

Alienation in the form of the separation of humans from each other and their world and in the sense of the subsumption of labour by capital which is the same as the 'transformation', 'transubstantiation', 'transposition', 'displacement', of labour to capital is at the centre of the concept of capital. That there is an exchange between past labour and living labour in which the former is dominant occurs only because of the self-presupposition of capital that is that social labour has been posited/produced by a previous and on-going process of separation in the contradictory and antagonistic form of capital and wage labour. The very character of the objective things and the sense of subjectivity as separate from things is itself produced through capitalist social relations. The social relations between people expressed as a movement of things become autonomous meanwhile the individual is produced as a bourgeois atomised individual. Capital then is not just objectivised labour, both 'objectivised labour' and subjective labour without objectivity are socially created forms into which the unity of the social individual is split and capital is value moving between them but always remaining capital. Capital separates human beings and then controls their connection, subordinates that connection to its purpose. Labour is capital, because in the form of alienated abstract labour it is the substance of capital. Thus the relationship between wage labour and capital is not an external opposition but an internal relation, and while capital appears to be the 'thing' side of the relation, such things are only

capital by their relation to their opposite and thus that opposite wage labour is in a real sense capital's most fundamental form.

Thus the very concepts TC like in the mature critique of political economy are based in alienation. The presupposition but also the result of capitalist production is the separation between workers and the means of production that is between subjective living labour and objectified past labour. That separation is a state of alienation and it is maintained by an active process of alienation. This process of alienation has two main phases: the sale<sup>180</sup> of labour power and the use of that labour power by capital. The two are interrelated. By the sale the worker has passed the use value of his labour power over to capital - right from the beginning the labour process the labour is incorporated into capital. Thus though in the actual production process the separation is superceded in a temporary unity, because the labour belongs to - is subsumed by - capital from the beginning, the unity is a unity for capital and the separation is immediately there again when the process finishes, when what is needed for reproduction exists again as an objectivity belonging to capital. The self-presupposition of capital is thus the other- presupposition of labour: self-reproducing alienation. It seems to us quite possible that TC will agree with most of the above exposition. After all TC said of our statement that: 'For us, the market or law of value is not the essence of capital; its essence is rather the self-expansion of value: that is, of alienated labour,' that this 'could very well be theirs'. The acceptance that value = alienated labour, that alienated abstract labour is the substance of value, is for us key to a good reading of Marx and TC would appear at least at one level to agree. TC accept and use the term alienation. But the rationale for their criticism of us can be found in one of their articles: 'Let us not confuse "alienated labour" as it functions in the *Manuscripts* and the alienation of labour that we will

---

180      it should be remembered that one root of the term alienation is simply the term to describe what happens when you sell something.

find in the *Grundrisse* or in *Capital*. In the first case, alienated labour is the self-movement of the human essence as generic being; in the second, it is no longer a question of human essence, but of historically determined social relations, in which the worker is separated in part or in whole from the conditions of his labour, of his product and of his activity itself<sup>7</sup>.

TC's reaction to some of our use of the term alienation is based on them - correctly enough - detecting in the articles some of the formulations not of the *Grundrisse* or *Capital* but of the *1844 Manuscripts*. Something separating us and TC is then a very different appreciation of the *1844 Manuscripts*. TC indicate that they do not like the text, we - while accepting it has limitations - see in it the the nub of Marx's Critique of Political Economy (CPE). We'd say that most of the concepts that TC like in the later Marx can be seen in embryo in the *1844 Manuscripts*.<sup>181</sup> TC on the other hand accept the Althusserian interpretation that the way Marx uses alienation in the *1844 Manuscripts* is essentially Feuerbachian.

For TC in the *1844 Manuscripts*:

The founding, primary movement is that of the self-alienation of man with regard to himself, everything else follows: the worker, alienated labour (which serves to "materialise" the self-alienation of Feurbach), private property etc. The starting point is the self alienation of man as a generic being; the self-movement of his essence, this defined as a genre, as an internal universality linking individuals like natural process (which will be critiqued in the Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach).

---

181      Something they come close to acknowledging the danger of: 'Our reading of the EPMs is determined by our knowledge of Marx's whole oeuvre to such a degree that we have difficulty in reading what is actually written'. Perhaps there is an extent to which we do the same but whereas they see only the break we see the connection. But we think there is more of a connection than break.

It seems to us TC (and Althusser) have got it wrong. Far then from Marx's use of species-being, as TC think, being merely a Feuerbachian concept of a generic being - 'an internal universality linking individuals like a natural process' - his presentation of the human essence in is precisely that it is nothing but activity: a living, evolving relation to nature created/constituted not primarily in consciousness (though human being is conscious being) but in and through social activity. Human historical activity in transforming nature, and creating specifically human sociability - transforms man. This activity has happened in the form of capital. The human essence for the Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts* it is not a generic category, it is not fixed - it becomes. The human essence is outside the individual, in the historically determined social relations that he is immersed in. Despite his praise of Feuerbach, Marx in the *Manuscripts* is already beyond him. Man makes himself in the form of estrangement. Man's 'social nature is realized only as its antithesis as estrangement.'<sup>182</sup>

A line (almost straight out of the *1844 Manuscripts* by the way<sup>183</sup>) that TC dislike is when we say 'revolution is the return of the subject to herself'. TC object that this 'doesn't really transcend the contradiction, or its terms, but it simply represents the return of the subject to itself (this smacks of teleology)'. Let us accept that there is a problem here. If the subject is the working class, then TC would be right to say that we remained 'within the perspective of the revolution as affirmation, as the triumph of the proletariat, and not as its abolition in the abolition of

---

182 Notes on Mill in Early Writings p. 269

183 'Communism as the positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e., human) being — a return accomplished consciously and embracing the entire wealth of previous development.'

capital'. Marx always insisted that the working class are not the sole sufferers of alienation, their importance lies rather in the way they experience the alienation, i.e. not being confirmed in it.<sup>184</sup> But the other choice that the alienated subject that returns to itself is humanity would seem to imply a quasi-religious idea of a return to a mythical harmonious subject, some sort of a golden age.

So are we and Marx wrong to use this phrase? Should, as TC following Althusser argue, it be rejected as part of a humanist problematic? We can accept that the subject here can not be the proletariat, nor a pre-existing humanity that has gone wandering and got lost. In the alienation the subject exists on both sides as proletariat and as capital, for capital is in a real sense simply the alienated powers of humanity. Such powers are also part of human subjectivity but produced (and produced only this way) in to use a phrase TC like - "the mode of being denied".<sup>185</sup> The revolution is not the a-historical return of labour to itself but rather return of what has developed as alienated labour to those from whom it has been alienated. It is a uniting of the fragmented social individual. In a sense the subject who returns to itself is humanity not the proletariat, but this is a humanity that didn't exist before the alienation; it has come to be through alienation.

Thus the subject is not the proletariat nor a pre-existing humanity; the subject does not exist yet apart from as the fragmented social individual produced in capitalism. For us and for the Young Marx the notion of return

---

184      The subject before class society and alienation was an undifferentiated unity with its object, capitalist alienation produces the subject and object, but these are not fixed but an on-going inversion communism brings them back together at a higher level giving the possibility of individuality beyond that experienced before class society.

185      A phrase we adopt from Gunn and the Common Sense bods.

it is about the (re-)union of humans with the social nature they have created historically and which did not exist before. This social nature has only ever existed in conditions of alienation, the overcoming of alienation will be something that has never existed before. If alienation is the inversion, a back and forth movement, between subjectivity and objectivity, the subject/object split itself is a manifestation of alienation. The objectivity of capitalism is a peculiar objectivity, a second nature constructed by human activity in the form of alienation. The human being is split and fragmented. Alienation involves the production by human beings of their existence 'outside' of themselves but the objectivity produced - the objectivity of value - is a strange phenomenon acting back on the producers. The existence of the economy as a 'second law bound nature' separate from the individuals who create it, an 'objectivity of value' based on what Marx in *Capital* called deranged (*verrückte*) forms. There is a coming to be of humanity through alienation. Capital is the essential species powers - 'the relentless productive powers of social labour' - developing as an end in themselves (Production for Production's sake) their reappropriation which would involve not a democratic management of this system of production but a new form of human being. The humanity from which we are alienated is a humanity which is not yet. Is this a teleology? - perhaps but if so it is one we can live with.

Contrary to all this, TC reject the idea they find in the *Manuscripts* of the 'necessity of alienation' in the 'becoming of man in alienation', saying 'The necessity of alienation is to produce the conditions of its suppression' - we are in the realm of teleology - with which Marx settles his account still in ambiguous manner in *The German Ideology*. But even twenty years later in the 'Missing Sixth Chapter' which TC like Marx is still saying the same thing:

at the level of material production, of the life process in the realm of the social — for that is what the process of production is — we find the

same situation that we find in religion at the ideological level, namely the inversion of subject into object and vice versa. Viewed historically this inversion is the indispensable transition without which wealth as such, i.e. the relentless productive powers of social labour, which alone can form the material basis of a free human society, could not possibly be created at the expense of the majority. This antagonistic stage cannot be avoided, any more than it is possible for man to avoid a stage when his spiritual energies are given a religious definition, as powers independent of himself. (*Capital* p. 990)

Indeed one could say that the whole idea of programmatism implies a period when alienation and the existence of the economy seemed to impose itself as a necessity on the proletariat.

In contradistinction to the analysis of alienation that we have made, TC put their emphasis on exploitation, and we include their definition of exploitation below as an Appendix. Now we accept that TC's understanding of exploitation does go further than the understanding of alienation that one can get from the 1844 Manuscripts. However we'd say that TC's emphasis on exploitation is only possible because they make an unusual understanding of exploitation closer in our view to what we understand as alienation. In their seven points of the definition they bring together self-presupposition, mutual involvement and the - subsumption of labour by capital, in particular the last - as they say 'exploitation is subsumption'.

Thus exploitation is grasped by TC as the contradictory relation of capital and labour: a total relation of classes. In effect it seems TC are using the 'Missing Sixth Chapter' to open up the theory of surplus value just as fetishism can be used to open up the theory of value. But just as fetishism refers us back to alienation so does subsumption. In the special definition of exploitation that TC develop, we have essentially a more concrete and historical sense of alienation that Marx has developed in his later works but it is still alienation. Capital exploits not through personal direct



domination but on the basis of alienation and the impersonal power of things - an economic alienation backed by the alienated force of the state. The point is not to use the 1844 concept of alienation as an alternative to the later CPE but to grasp the later CPE as a more concrete development of the dynamic of alienation.

TC might say that we are getting quite metaphysical, what with an idea of a subject that returns to itself never having existed before, and they prefer exploitation as the key concept because of its 'toughness' and precision. But for us it is alienation that is the more specific concept to capitalism. Exploitation that is, the extraction of surplus labour, defines in general any class society, while it is the extraction of surplus labour in the form of surplus value - that is exploitation on the basis of alienation - that is specific to capitalism. Exploitation as valorisation is labour becoming alien, and a theory of valorisation and of capitalism cannot but be based on alienation and fetishism. Alienation deals with aspects of capital that the category of exploitation has to be really stretched to encompass.

Indeed to make exploitation do the work they ask of it, TC also go against the grain of the way the category has been used. That the 'worker is exploited' has actually been stressed by the traditional left for whom the working class has been seen to exist independently from capitalism with no mutual involvement and the problem is 'capitalism exploits it.' It therefore needs to be 'freed from exploitation' in a socialist (work) regime.

It probably boils down to a matter of different political contexts. TC's use of Althusser on alienation is part a reaction to certain ultra left or pro-situ scenes where the discourse of alienation and/or the 'critique of work' works in ideological way. Alienation can be seen as a psychological state of or as the separation from some human essence with an inherent tendency towards communism. In particular the way that the ultra left has developed in France since '68 has had two main theoretical directions one: the minor one -TC's; the other is more humanist in a sense of a

focus on the contrast of capital and the human community<sup>186</sup>. TC see the latter approach as a theoretical dead end. Whereas for us the political context makes the issue almost the opposite! Ultra leftism, particularly the sophisticated ultra leftism and its turn to a humanistic problematic that TC are responding to, is hardly an issue for us. The arguments have far more for us involved the need to stress alienation against an objectivist leftism that has stressed exploitation! The emphasis on exploitation, 'the theory of surplus value', has to a large extent been a feature of more objectivist scientific Marxists, for example of those who believe there is such a thing as Marxist economics. To focus on alienation has seemed key to us because the idea of an unalienated existence reaches for the radicality of what communism means against the prevalent political conception of

---

186 According to TC the dominant tendency of the ultra left tries to answer the question 'How can a class, acting strictly as a class, abolish capitalism?' by: taking up the contribution of the Lefts without the managementist aspect (*Le Mouvement Communiste* journal and book), or in abandoning it altogether, to be left with nothing but a catalogue of 'revolutionary positions' ('Bail a Céder') of which the 'revolutionaries' were the sole guarantors. This route was pursued later by the journals *La Banquise* and *La Guerre Sociale*, but with more and more support for a humanist conception of the proletariat, notably present in *La Brise-Glace* and *Mordicus*: the liberation of human activity from work or from class, capital as oppression, the proletariat as the poor. Finally, no longer able to envisage the contradiction between the proletariat and capital as productive of communism, the vision on the whole was that of an opposition between communist and capitalist tendencies. This finished by understanding the movement of society as an opposition between the true human community and the false - democracy (hence the revisionist deviation, cf. TC 13).

socialism. The critique of alienation is simultaneously a critique of politics, and of all the regimes that have been held up as transitional to communism.

On the question of alienation then, we do not think there is much chance of us becoming Althusserians. But to be fair TC are not Althusserians, they find something useful in Althusser, Balibar etc. TC make the point that they have only started reading Althusser seriously in the last few years i.e. long after they had already developed all their main positions. We can agree that we must take useful ideas from where we find them. Probably in France a look at what academic thought had to offer would find currents influenced by Althusser inescapable, whereas we have tended to find the 'Hegelian Marxist' reaction against Althusserianism more useful. However such appropriation should be a careful one and thus we would be interested in knowing what TC think is good or important about Althusser/Balibar - what do they accept and what do they reject? What are the texts or concepts that they think are key?

## **QUESTIONING TC'S PERIODISATION OF CAPITALISM**

Another main issue we have doubts about is TC's periodisation of capitalism. TC seem to put a lot of weight on the periodisation of capitalism in terms of a dichotomy of formal and real subsumption to explain the changes in capitalism. For TC there is a stage of formal subsumption up to around 1900 or the First World War, a first phase of real subsumption of labour until the seventies and a second stage of real subsumption since then. The workers' movement based on the assertion of workers' identity arises in the period of formal subsumption, becomes the institutionalisation of the worker as collective labourer in the first period of real subsumption, and then, with the second phase of real subsumption, suffers an irreversible decline.

TC are by no means the only ones to use these categories for a periodisation of capitalism. It is perhaps best known in the way it has been taken up by the autonomist marxists in terms of the thesis of the

social factory associated with Tronti and taken up enthusiastically by Negri. However we think that the first to develop the idea was Jacques Camatte in *Invariance*<sup>187</sup> and this led to its adoption by large part of the French ultra left in the early seventies. We ourselves in the decadence articles adopted the periodisation at one point. This periodisation has a lot to recommend it. Unlike the decline problematic which our original articles critiqued, the periodisation on the basis of formal and real subsumption catches the way the world has become more and more capitalist. Real subsumption describes the commodification and penetration by capital into nearly all areas of social life. It brings out the extent to which the domination of capital has become more intense.

But as we have seen the diverse ways that people try and use this periodisation it occurs to us that perhaps its very appeal is linked with a vagueness, a lack of theoretical precision - it can mean all things to all people.<sup>188</sup> For example while for most it has been a way to drop the idea of decline, others combine it with such a theory while for some it becomes part of a break from Marx (Camatte) others have tried to follow closely what Marx wrote (Communism or Civilisation) While using this periodisation against the schematicism of ascendancy and declining capitalism was undoubtedly useful we wonder if there is not a new danger of a sterile schematicism with the stages based on the two forms of subsumption? Thus we have serious questions about this periodisation and wish to understand if TC's use of it has the problems we detect in other advocates.

---

187      Published in English as *Capital and Community: The results of the immediate process of Production and the economic work of Marx* (Unpopular Books).

188      The main text for an understanding of Marx's understanding of formal and real subsumption is the 1861-63 manuscripts (Collected Works 30 and 33-34).

TC's periodisation of the twentieth century makes a lot of sense in terms of when they see the breaks happening (they correspond with the revolutionary waves we are familiar with) and the content they put in these phases is also quite recognisable. However TC seem to intend more by these stages than just a description of the key elements of these periods, the stages are meant to be explanatory, i.e. that we moved into a phase of real subsumption explains the changes and that we moved into a second phase explains the subsequent changes. Thus it would seem to us that TC need to explain how changes in the labour process around 1900 marked its real subsumption, how this is connected to the general class struggle and workers movement and how the varied features they identify with these stages are explained by the changes in the labour process. What in other words justifies calling these periods that come after these strong waves of struggle around 1917 and 1968, phases of the real subsumption of labour? Perhaps a lot of this would be cleared up by translation of more of their texts but once again we are stuck with what we have got.

One of the problems with this is the extension of the category from the factory to society is the real subsumption of society something separate to the real subsumption of labour or is it that changes in society follow when real subsumption in the factory has become dominant? If real subsumption is a feature only of the twentieth century then what exactly is the real subsumption of labour? Are we dealing with a suggestive idea of a rough general tendency or a quite firm periodisation that a lot is to rely on? If the issue is one of relative surplus value becoming dominant then how do we define dominance? Why the dates? How in general does the change in the immediate process of production relate to circulation? How does it relate to the relation between the political and the economic?

For Marx formal and real subsumption of labour were clearly stages of the emergence of the capitalist mode of production not a way of periodising its maturity. As we already mentioned formal subsumption is when a

pre-capitalist labour process is taken over by capital, real subsumption is when that labour process becomes transformed. (The classic example of the formal subsumption of labour was the putting out system where the traditional craft production peasants performed in their homes started to be done for a capitalist middleman who provided them with the raw materials and took away their product.) With formal subsumption exploitation can only take the form of absolute surplus value that is the extension of the absolute length of the working day beyond the time workers would previously have worked and must still work to produce the value of their means of subsistence. With real subsumption capital is able to also gain relative surplus value due to the increased productivity thus allowing the worker to reproduce the value of the wage - means of subsistence - in less time leaving relatively more time for the production of surplus value.

However what this means is that even the earliest form of capitalist production described by Marx - co-operation - has elements of real subsumption, as did the next phase - manufacture - and certainly the stage of large-scale industry is based of real subsumption.<sup>189</sup> Of course we can see a good argument for proper real subsumption only being a feature of the use of machinery, thus dating it to the introduction of of large scale industry in the the last third of the eighteenth century. We can also see an argument that would make the class struggle over the working day as decisive for the development of a stage of real subsumption, thus dating it to the mid nineteenth century on the basis that the class struggle imposed limits to the working day, forcing capital to rely more and more on relative surplus value as the extension of absolute surplus value is blocked. We can't however quite see on what basis the introduction of real subsumption

---

189 This is indicated by the fact that all these systems of production are placed by marx in part 4 of Capital "The production of Relative surplus value"

should occur around World War I nor why the undoubted changes that occurred around the 70s should be a new phase of real subsumption.

If as we understand that TC's argument is made on the basis of the real subsumption of Department II (that is, that part of capitalist production producing means of subsistence for the working class and hence able to affect the value of the wage) and they admit that this is here they are following work of the Regulation School.<sup>190</sup> (However the Regulation School used this criteria of the subsumption of Department II as a basis of a theory of fordism, a shift from extensive to intensive accumulation and don't speak of real subsumption of labour.) Does TC's idea of real subsumption correspond with Aglietta's idea of an intensive accumulation? Anyway wasn't the key industry of the beginning of the CMP, cotton, a Department II good and even more fundamentally hasn't capitalism always depended on the subsumption and massive revolutionising of the production of the ultimate Department II sector — agriculture. At the very least the introduction of machinery science and machinery - thus real subsumption — has been a feature since the 1850s? Finally isn't there issues with being country specific - for example if one uses the amount of peasantry as a sign that agriculture is not fully subsumed does that not put countries all moving to real subsumption at different times and indeed it may be coherent to see capital as moving from formal to real domination in different areas of the world at different times, for example, might not the last few decades have shown a whole swath of countries from South Korea to Indonesia China and India moving from formal to real subsumption? But would they be in the first or second stage? We get no suggestion of this from the TC that we have read in fact we get a hint of a eurocentrism or even Franco-centrism to the analysis.

We think it is possible to conceive of the shift in a more flexible way. TC would no doubt accept the real subsumption of labour presupposes

---

190 Michel Aglietta "A Theory of Capitalist regulation"

the formal subsumption of labour - just as the production of relative surplus value presupposes the production of absolute surplus value. Following this one could argue that after the historical transition to the real subsumption of labour to capital that occurred with the emergence of the capitalist mode of production, there still remains a tension between the two. Even in industries that have long been 'really subsumed', capital will always take the existing immediate process of production developed by the previous accumulation of capital and its struggle with the working class as a given - as a barrier to further accumulation. At the same time workers will attempt to defend the skills and working practices. Thus, for example, Taylorism was introduced to break the power over the production process of the skilled industrial worker. But these skills and practices were not pre-capitalist - most of them did not exist hundred years before - but were industrial skills and practices developed out of several decades of struggle and compromise. Another example might be the computer industry which on the one hand is instrumental in the revolutionizing and hence real subsumption of other sectors but in its own production of software produces a working environment where the relationship between the personifications of capital and those of labour resemble the formal subsumption of craft skills. If one is going to use the formal and real subsumption of labour in a way beyond that in Marx then this approach would seem a more subtle way of conceptualising the mutual involvement of capital and labour in terms of these categories than that offered by TC. Instead of a once and for all transition we could have many transaitions at different times and places and the abstract terms of real and formal would have to be given a concrete content.

### THE CRITIQUE OF THE DECADENCE ARTICLES

With no agenda of defending the articles lets briefly look back at some of their critique of particular parts of the article. TC correctly identify that despite our correct observation that 'Communism is a content - the



abolition of wage labour - not a form,' our treatment of the Russian revolution remains formal. That is, one could say it within the terms of the debate of the sixties and seventies - of self-management versus Bolshevik centralism of which Maurice Brinton's *The Bolsheviks and Workers Control* - is perhaps a classic representative. TC cut to the heart of this debate by quoting a situation recounted by Voline where the opposition between the workers attempt 'to organize their transactions with other firms themselves' and the Bolshevik attempt to centralize the process was clearly demonstrated but TC then ask the question, 'but is it possible to imagine an exchange which would not take a form alienated from the exchangers connected by it?' (*Aufheben* 11, p. 50).

TC's suggestion here is that workers self management and Bolshevik control were two answers to the same wrong question, a question posed by the limits of the revolution, its inability to pose communism as communisation. For them the Bolshevik counter-revolution needs to be "related to the content of the revolution", a content related to the nature of the contradiction between capital and proletariat at this time. The counter-revolution was carried in the revolution, the Bolsheviks were simply the force that carried it out.

TC here seem to express a determinism with regards the fate of the Russian Revolution. For them the failure of the Russian revolution was determined but not by the level of the productive forces considered in a technical sense, that is as something exterior to the class, but rather by the character of the capital-labour relation at this time, which led to class struggle taking the form of differing conceptions of the affirmation of the proletariat none of which by nature could put capital into question. Thus TC answer's to why the Russian Revolution, developed the way it did is in terms of their big concept of Programmatism. In terms of the treatment of the Russian Revolution TC's approach certainly puts it

into perspective and offers an escape from the '1917centrism' of much of the left/ultra-left.

On another point TC correctly observe that when we criticised *Radical Chains* account of the relation of the wage and welfare we fell into a model of 'on the one hand value on the other state activities' to which they say 'being constrained forms part of the definition of value' that is that "political" forms of dealing with the class 'are attributes of value, of wages and exploitation'. Looking back we would stand by the overall thesis against *Radical Chains* that one specific relation between economic forces and political forces - The New Poor Law of the Nineteenth century- cannot be taken as the essential one from which others represent a decline of the law of value. However the way we made our point does fall into fetishised separations of the political and economic. To talk of value in relation to its fundamental commodity of labour power being constrained by political forces is wrong. The state is not separate from the wage relation - it forms part of its very existence. Our analysis here failed to take on board that the separation of the economic and the political in capitalism is a bifurcation of the capital relation, thus that value is not merely a category of 'economics' of the 'market' but is equally one of the 'politics' of state spending and action, economics and politics are two complementary aspects of the one value - that is class - relation. We should have taken more seriously our own reading of the Marxist work on the state capital relation.

On the crisis TC focus in on the account we give of the 'productive forces - social relations' contradiction in a footnote to the third part of the article. Looking back at this one remembers that among all the critiques of other theories of the crisis there was a wish to suggest positively the direction in which a more fruitful understanding of crisis would lie. TC say our formulation does not escape a dualism as 'On one side the crisis, on the other the class struggle; a meeting of divergent interests shaping

capital's path, but the development of capital and the crisis cannot be understood in themselves as class struggle.' We are quite happy to admit that it needs more work and that as it stands it does not escape an objectivist problematic.

A similar point comes out in how TC judge our account of autonomist Marxism. TC harshly but probably accurately say that despite making some good points in our critique of the class struggle theory of the crisis, that we have ended 'with a sort of position of mitigation: you must deobjectify the contradiction between capital and the proletariat, but keep aside a little objectivity, above all for periods of counter-revolution' (p. 51). We feel TC are right here - our critique of autonomist Marxism and our suggestion of an alternative theory of crisis has not gone to the root because really the root of the critique of the autonomist Marxism would be a theory which escapes the objectivism/anti-objectivism position, a theory that our articles called for but did not produce. TC we think may show the way to such a theory:

The radical critique of objectivism, the theoretical destruction of economy as such (to reconstruct the economic relation as a class relation), is absolutely necessary for else we would be stuck with subjectivism, that is to say, in imagining ourselves to be giving the role of an active subject to the proletariat we would be placing it in an objective situation in relation to which it must have a strategy, of which it must 'become conscious'. Here lies all the importance of the ideological figure of the militant, the sole true carrier of revolutionary subjectivity faced with the objectivism of the 'situation' which he himself has posed, and which permits him to ask (not understanding the meaning of 'crisis of the relation of exploitation'): "But then what is there to do?", though the question is not at all what can we do but "where are we in our theoretical and practical struggles, where is the production of the revolutionary crisis at the moment?", because there is never any lag of consciousness. There is no such thing as an 'objectively'

revolutionary situation, or rather, every 'objective' situation is by definition not revolutionary, because objectivity is capital reproducing itself as economy. In the revolutionary explosion the production of 'theory', that is to say the consciousness in action of the revolution, will appear as a massive disobjectification of the relation between proletariat and capital.

### CONCLUSION

One might say that a lot of what TC say has been said by others, but it has not been integrated in the same way. For example, the idea of a periodisation of capitalism based on formal and real subsumption and the critique of self-management is shared by much of the (ultra) left. However TC seem to be alone in taking these ideas towards a radical critique of the ultra left's whole conception of the relation of class struggle and communism. On the other hand TC's recognition of the recent decline in working class identity and questioning of the mythology of the inherently revolutionary nature of the class struggle in the past has similarities with Camatte and of course with numerous bourgeois thinkers. However TC do this without rejecting the key role of class in the overthrow of capitalist mode of production.

A question that may occur to people is: what practical use is TC? What conclusions do they draw from their abstract theory? Well, TC have interesting things to say about struggles they are involved in.<sup>191</sup> Our impression is that the sophistication of their theory allows TC's involvement in struggles to be very practical, because it allows them to neither measure struggles by an impossible standard nor go in for the ritual denunciations of unions and the left that many on the ultra left seem to.

For us we felt compelled to give TC attention because they produced a challenging critique of our decadence articles, and did so on the basis of their own theoretical perspective that tantalisingly offers the possibility of going further than we were able to do with those articles. Our experience

191 e.g. 'Diary of a Striker' on the movement of '95.

with TC is that their texts require multiple readings and some considerable effort but most of it does make some sort of sense after that. The question is whether TC deliver the promise of a theory that genuinely overcomes the dichotomy of structure and struggle, objectivism and subjectism, determinism and voluntarism or whether it perhaps reproduces some of the weaknesses of the theories of the ultra left, Althusser, the Regulation Approach, it appropriates from.

We are driven to theoretical reflection, as we are driven to participate in the class struggle. We are not driven by something outside ourselves but by the recognition that ultimately nothing is outside ourselves. We have come across TC and they pose some serious questions to which we don't have the answers; so we must continue to ask the questions.

## APPENDIX

(From TC14:) 'This contradiction is exploitation

1. It defines the existing classes in a strict relation of reciprocal implication.

2. As accumulation it immediately poses the contradiction between classes as an historical process.

3. It defines its terms not as separate poles with determined natures being modified through history, acting in relation to an exterior movement of accumulation posed as the condition of their action, but makes the relation between the terms and its movement the 'essence' of its terms.

4. It is, as the contradiction between the proletariat and capital, the process of the historical signification of the capitalist mode of production; it qualitatively defines the process of accumulation of capital as de-essentialisation of work, as 'contradiction in process'; it defines the accumulation of capital as its obituary (cf. Marx, *Grundrisse* MECW p. 601).

5. It means that the proletariat is never confirmed in its relationship with capital: exploitation is subsumption. The contradiction between proletariat and capital is the very means by which work exists socially -

valorisation. Defined by exploitation, the proletariat is in contradiction with the socially necessary existence of its work as capital, that is to say value become autonomous and only remaining so in valorising itself: the fall of the rate of profit is a contradiction between the classes. Exploitation as contradiction de-objectifies the movement of capital.

6. The proletariat is constantly in contradiction with its own definition as class: \*It encounters the necessity of its own reproduction as an object opposed to itself, in the form of capital. \*It never finds its confirmation in the reproduction of the social relation of which it is nevertheless a necessary pole. \*It is in contradiction not with an automatic movement of reproduction of the capitalist mode of production but with another class, capital is necessarily the capitalist class. For the proletariat its own existence as class passes by a mediation: the antagonistic class.

7. Not permitting the definition of classes outside their reciprocal implication and the historical flow of their contradiction (the contradiction is precisely this historical flow), exploitation nonetheless specifies the place of each of the classes in this implication. It is always the proletariat that is subsumed under capital, and at the end of each cycle capital must reproduce the confrontation with labour; exploitation is effectively realised with the transformation, never accomplished, of surplus value into additional capital (capital as process of its own self-presupposition). With exploitation as contradiction between the classes we understand their particularisation as particularisation of the community, and therefore as being simultaneously their reciprocal implication. This then signifies: the impossibility of the affirmation of the proletariat, the contradiction between the proletariat and capital as history, the critique of all theories of the revolutionary nature of the proletariat as a definitive essence buried or masked by the reproduction of the totality (the self-presupposition of capital). We have historicized the contradiction, and therefore revolution and communism and not just their circumstances. Revolution and

communism are produced historically through the cycles of struggle that mark time in the march of the unfolding contradiction.'

From '*Pour An Finire Avec La Critique Du Travail*' TC 17:

'The critique of work can only have an object and can only justify itself only if it constructs its object outside [ '*auterieurement?*' ] the social relation, and so it becomes purely speculative; inversely if it is the historically determined social relations that it makes a critique of, it enters into contradiction with its own initial moment of abstract formulation of its object. The critique of would like work as a social relation outside [ '*auterieurement*' ] from all social relation. The critique of work is a dead end. Firstly it constructs an object of analysis which is work in itself; secondly, it wants to deduce from the analysis of this activity - which as it has been presented is a speculative abstraction - the contradictory social relations in which human beings evolve. This, either by a contradictory development internal to this activity, or by an irreducible property of alienation, that, by nature, this activity possesses. The particular modulations of this general impasse end up all with the transformation of the critique of capitalist society and of its fundamental social relation, exploitation, into a critique of work, a critique of activity. The subject we are dealing with is therefore a bit paradoxical. It is to define work to say that the critique of work is not an object of critical theory. This for two reasons: the "critique of work" is a dead end, the; the abolition of work does not happen via the "critique of work" ..... It is then as a moment of the critique of these ideologies, that it is necessary to critique work as the object of this critique and because this notion of work plays an active practical role in the shaping of struggles in the most radical currents of 'radical democratism ' . The limit of all critiques of work is that they place activity, as the essence of critique, what should be understood as social relations. In this, this critique always refers to the Feuerbachian concept of 'alienated labour' developed in the '*EPMs of 1844*'. Based on the religious model,

the basis of the concept of “alienated labour” is that the object produced by the worker appears as the objectification of the essence of man which becomes alien to him. There is a concept of “alienated labour” only if we suppose a human essence like a generic being that loses and finds itself, that lost itself only to find itself again. As Marx says in his own short preface to the manuscripts, Marx finds in Feurbach’s philosophy the positive basis to pursue the critique of political economy to which he searches to find a “basis in reason”. This basis is man as generic being on the one hand, and on the other, alienation the paradigm of which is religious alienation. The concept of alienated labour is built from these fundamentals. “We have considered the act of alienation of practical human activity under two aspects; firstly the relation of the worker to the product of labour...Secondly the relation of work to the act of production... As such we have taken from the two precedents a third determination of alienated labour. (here follows the definition of “generic being”). Through alienated labour, man doesn’t only encounter his relation to the object and the act of production as alien [‘etrangere’] forces which are hostile to him. He encounters also the relation in which other men find themselves in regard to their product and their activity and the relationship which he has with these other men.” The categories of political economy, and first of all those of private property, can therefore be deduced from alienated labour. But these categories which “express” alienated labour “in its reality”, are themselves, as formulations of the social relation, only the manifestation of the auto-alienation of man which is the first principle, founding “in reason” the categories of political economy. Our reading of the EPMs is determined by our knowledge of Marx’s whole oeuvre to such a degree that we have difficulty in reading what is actually written: alienated labour is the basis and principle of all relations between individuals as they exist in society. The founding, primary movement is that of the self-alienation of man with regard to himself, everything else follows: the



worker, alienated labour (which serves to “materialise” the self-alienation of Feuerbach), private property etc. The starting point is the self-alienation of man as a generic being; the self-movement of his essence, this defined as a genre, as an internal universality linking individuals like natural process (which will be critiqued in the 6th thesis on Feuerbach). From which, two results: the impossibility to make of history a reality, and connected with this, - the teleological question par excellence which runs throughout the text without Marx offering an answer: “How does man come to alienate his labour, to produce it as something external to him. How does alienation establish itself in the development of humanity. Because when we speak of private property, we believe we are dealing with something external to man, although when we talk of labour we are immediately dealing with man himself. This new formulation of the question already implies its answer.” Answer which must be so obvious that Marx never formulates it when he asks the question. Marx goes beyond what he calls “the strange discourse of political economy”, “which dissimulated alienation in the essence of labour by refusing to consider the direct relation between the worker (labour) and production.” The direct relation between the worker and production which is for him the loss of his product, it’s derealisation [*derealisation*], becomes “alienated labour” that is the essential relation of labour”. Alienation is inserted as the essence of labour, but as a relation of labour to the human essence, or better as the movement of the human essence as labour: “labour is the becoming of man in alienation”. The “solution” to the “necessity of alienation” is in the last chapter of the manuscripts - that we will have to search for it in the form of a “realist” understanding of the negation of the Hegelian negation. The necessity of alienation is to produce the conditions of its suppression - we are in the realm of teleology - with which Marx settles his account still in an ambiguous manner in “The German Ideology”. The critique of labour in the EPMs is only the critique of the auto-alienation of the

human essence. All critique of labour functions in this way, in that it starts from the alienation of a subject to deduct the “social frame” of this alienation, even if they don’t share the same “theoretical manner” as the EPMs. Take out the human essence as genre, as this abstract universality inherent to each individual and linking them together, you have the 6th thesis on Feuerbach, and you have removed the legitimacy of this critique of labour as foundation to all critiques of historical forms of particular social contradictions. Let us not confuse “alienated labour” as it functions in the Manuscripts and the alienation of labour that we will find in the *Grundrisse*...” or in “Capital”. In the first case, alienated labour is the self-movement of the human essence as generic being; in the second, it is no longer a question of human essence, but of historically determined social relations, in which the worker is separated in part or in whole from the conditions of his labour, of his product and of his activity itself, (petit-bourgeois production, because of the exchange of products and thus their productions as commodities, is equally alienation of labour). If we are no longer searching for the cause of alienation, and more precisely of exploitation, in activity itself as labour, (a search which cannot go beyond a negative anthropology becoming a positive anthropology), it isn’t to say that the critique of social relations does not take in a critique of labour and that we consider labour as an activity which is eternal. We do not have an a-priori definition of labour, we will outline it here, partly as a critique of the “critique of labour”, understood as a limit in the class struggle in general as it manifests itself under the real subsumption of labour to capital (in the struggles of the unemployed and precarious workers it appeared both as its most radical expression and as its limit); and partly as abolition and overcoming of the capitalist mode of production. It is only from the basis of this double critique that we should understand what is work and its abolition, without that we inevitably fall back into a perspective where the contradictory social relations of capitalism, the

class struggle, the abolition of the capitalist system, appear as developments and successive forms of Labour realising itself. What is important for an understanding of exploitation, its critique and abolition, is that it is the social relations which make human activity labour - what is important therefore is the abolition of this social relation (the separation with the community), and not the abolition of labour itself, a thing which has no intrinsic dynamic to itself at all. With the abolition of the capitalist mode of production and therefore of wage-labour which is its fundamental social relation, it appears that the production of relations between individuals is no longer subjected to, mediated by, the activity of man as an objective being, which (mediation between individual activity and social activity), is by that the master and object of the relation. Labour is human activity as objective being in the separation of individual activity and social activity, and by that becomes the substance of its social value. ...With the abolition of capitalism, it is man himself, the free development of his individuality, which becomes the goal, the means, the object of this objective activity.'

## The Debate – Part 3

### Théorie Communiste responds

In *Aufheben* #11 we published a critique of our articles on ‘decadence’ (from *Aufheben* issues 2-4) by the French group *Théorie Communiste* (TC). In the following issue we published our reply to TC’s critique. Since then we have had a number of exchanges with TC in which they responded to our reply. We have collected together their written responses and an edited version of them (with footnotes added by us) is presented below.

In their response TC go some way towards clarifying their theoretical positions concerning some of the main issues that have arisen out of their original critique of our ‘decadence’ articles. Yet, while their response answers some of the questions we raised regarding TC’s theory it still leaves many unanswered, notably in regard to their periodisation. And as we have already stated, we cannot accept their account of a conceptual shift in Marx’s use of the concept of alienation. (For a critique of TC on the concept of alienation in Marx see Chris Arthur: <http://libcom.org/library/on-theorie-communiste>)

Originally we had planned to publish a short introduction to TC’s response that would seek to respond in turn to the issues they raise, in particular the ‘ad hominem’ point at the end; but we were unable to come to an agreement. On top of this, some of us feel that we don’t have enough translated material to understand how the specific theoretical positions cohere within TC’s theory as a whole and how the abstract formulations with which they present their positions are theoretically grounded or result from detailed particular analyses. As a result of these difficulties we decided to draw this particular exchange with TC in the pages of *Aufheben* to a close by giving TC the last word.

Whatever uncertainties and disagreements we have with them, TC have raised important questions and we hope to take some of these questions up in future issues of *Aufheben*.

After reading your text on TC in *Aufheben* #12, and assuming a good linguistic understanding on my part, it would seem that you raise three points on which we diverge, or on which additional work is required by TC in order to justify our analyses:

- 1) Doesn't the proletariat have to recognise itself as a class before abolishing itself?
- 2) The foundation of the possibility of a second phase of real subsumption in the concepts of capital and real subsumption.
- 3) The concept of alienation.

I have deliberately left the question of Althusser to one side. To approach this question in its own right would, on both sides, only lead us up a blind alley. However interesting it could be to examine and criticise Althusser's positions on a number of questions, to pose Althusser as the subject in his own right would ensnare us in our discussions, as he would become the positive or negative referent of the questions that we want to deal with. These questions would be transformed by making Althusser the point of reference.

### **1) DOESN'T THE PROLETARIAT HAVE TO RECOGNISE ITSELF AS A CLASS BEFORE ABOLISHING ITSELF?**

To put it briefly, we define the current cycle of struggles as a situation where the proletariat only exists as a class in its contradictory relation to capital, which precludes any confirmation of a workers' identity or any 'return to itself' in its opposition to capital; the contradiction with capital is for the proletariat a contradiction it faces with itself, a situation in which it calls itself into question.

The proletariat doesn't become a 'purely negative' being as a result of this, except if we understand by this the critique of any conception of a revolutionary nature of the proletariat. We pass from a perspective where the proletariat finds in itself and in its opposition to capital its capacity to produce communism, to a perspective where this capacity is only acquired as an internal movement of that whose abolition it enables. Such an abolition thus becomes a historical process: the development of the relation and not the triumph of one of its terms in the form of its generalisation. The proletariat only produces communism in (and through) the course of the contradiction with capital and not in itself, emancipating itself from capital or revealing itself against it. There is no subversive being of the proletariat. If the negation is an internal moment of what is negated, the supersession is a development of the contradiction; it is not the revelation or actualisation of a revolutionary nature, but an internal historical production.

As the dissolution of the existing conditions, the proletariat is defined as a class within capital and in its relation with it, that is to say as the class of value producing labour and more precisely surplus-value producing labour. It is not as the dissolution of these categories that the proletariat poses itself as a class, is constituted as a class; rather it is as a class that the proletariat is this dissolution; this is the very content of its objective situation as a class. Its capacity to abolish capital and produce communism lies in its condition as class of the capitalist mode of production. The dissolution of all existing conditions is a class, it is living labour in opposition to capital. What has disappeared in the current crisis/restructuring is not this objective existence; it is the confirmation within the reproduction of capital of a proletarian identity. Exploitation simultaneously defines the proletariat as the class of surplus-value producing labour and as the dissolution of all existing conditions on the basis of these conditions, within the dynamic of the capitalist mode of production (understood as

class struggle). The proletariat's capacity to bring about the abolition of the capitalist mode of production is contained in its strict situation as a class of this mode of production.

When we say that the proletariat only exists as a class within and against capital, that it produces its entire being, all its organisation, reality and constitution as a class in and against capital, we are merely stating that it is the class of surplus-value producing labour. As the class of productive labour, the proletariat constantly recognises itself as such in the course of any given struggle, the most immediate effect of which is always the social polarisation of classes.

The simplest things are often the most difficult to understand. A class recognises itself as a class through its relation to another class; a class only exists to the extent that it has to wage a struggle against another class. A class has no prior definition explaining and producing its contradiction with another class; it is only in the contradiction with another class that it recognises itself as a class. What disappears in the current cycle of struggles is the ability of this general relationship which defines classes to comprise a moment of return-to-self for the proletariat in the form of a definition of its own identity which it could oppose to capital (an identity which seemed inherent to the class and opposable to capital, when in fact it was nothing other than the particular product of a certain historical relation between the proletariat and capital, confirmed by the specific movement of capital). The proletariat does not become a 'purely negative being'; it is simply a class.

There exists an old framework that we have great difficulty in discarding: the confusion between the positive recognition of the proletariat as class and the particular historical forms of self-organisation and autonomy. In its struggles the proletariat assumes all the forms of organisation necessary for its action. But does this mean that when the proletariat assumes the organisational forms necessary for its immediate goals (communisation

will equally be an immediate goal) it exists for itself as an autonomous class? No.

Self-organisation and union power belonged to the same world of the revolution as affirmation of the class. Self-organisation or the autonomy of the proletariat are not stronger or weaker constant tendencies in the class struggle, but determinate historical forms that it has taken. We can remove all content from these forms and call self-organisation any group of people deciding in common what they are going to do, but in this case all human activity is self-organisation and the term no longer carries any interest. Self-organisation and its content, workers' autonomy, arose from a contradiction between the proletariat and capital containing the capacity for the proletariat to relate to itself as class in its opposition to capital, that is to say a specific relation in which the proletariat was able to find in itself its foundation, its own constitution, its own reality, on the basis of a workers' identity which the modalities of the reproduction of capital had long been confirming. For the theories of self-organisation and of autonomy, it was a question of making the link between immediate struggles and the revolution via those elements in the struggles which could manifest a rupture with the integration of a defence and reproduction of the proletarian condition: the conquest of its identity autonomous from capital, autonomous from the political and union forms of this integration. Self-organisation and autonomy were only possible on the basis of the constitution of a workers' identity, a constitution which restructuring has swept aside.

It is the proletariat's very ability to find in its relation to capital the basis for constituting itself as an autonomous class which has disappeared. The particularisation of the valorisation process, the 'big factory', the submission of fixed capital to the requirements of massified labour, the division between productive and unproductive activities, between production and unemployment, production and training...etc., all that



which is superseded by the current restructuring, was the substance, at the very interior of the capitalist relation, of a proletarian identity and autonomy. Self-organisation and autonomy are not constants whose reappearance could be awaited with more or less patience; rather they constitute a completed cycle of struggle. For there to be self-organisation and autonomy it is necessary for there to be a self-affirmation of the productive class in opposition to capital. Today self-organisation and autonomy have paradoxically become the preserve of groups and militants (cf the clear evolution in France starting with the struggles in the steel industry in 1979) and above all of 'radical unions'. As a result the standard bearers of self-organisation have been reduced to opposing a 'pure' self-organisation (i.e. one which is confused with the struggle) to any fossilisation or union development of this. But in the real process of self-organisation there was always a constant evolution towards this fossilisation and unionisation; it is intrinsic to the type of contradiction which expresses itself in self-organisation as well as to the defence of the proletarian condition which constituted its unsurpassable limit. That self-organisation which in its purity is confused with the struggle has never existed. It is nothing other than an abstract ideology of the real course of struggles.

The class struggle in general is not autonomous. The fact that the actors in a struggle don't delegate to anyone else the task of determining the conduct of their struggle is not 'autonomy', rather it means that capitalist society is composed of contradictory interests and of forms of representation which in themselves reproduce the social relations which are being struggled against; it is to have an activity which defines the others or the constraints to be defined; it means that the group in struggle or the fraction of the class, or the class in its entirety, don't have their own definition in and of themselves, in some inherent way, but that this definition is the ensemble of social relations. Finally it means considering society as organic totality and activity. Autonomy supposes that the social

definition of a group is inherent to that group, almost natural, and to the relations defined in the course of struggle with other similarly defined groups. Where there is organism, it sees only addition; where there is activity and relation, it sees only object and nature.

We can only talk of autonomy if the working class is capable of relating to itself in opposition to capital and of finding in this relation with itself the bases and the capacity for its affirmation as the dominant class. It comes down to a formalisation of what we are in present society, which then becomes the basis of the new society to be constructed as the liberation of what we are. The relations of production consequently only appear as a constraint.

It isn't the decline of workers' struggles or their current essentially 'defensive' character which explains the decline of autonomy; rather this is explained by their transformation, their inscription in a new relation to capital. In the current struggles, whether they are 'defensive' or 'offensive' (a distinction linked to the problematic of the increase in strength of the class, and for which the 'evidence' would have to be criticised), the proletariat recognises capital as its *raison d'être*, as its existence standing opposite itself, as the only necessity of its own existence. From the moment where the class struggle is situated on the level of reproduction, the proletariat finds itself in any given struggle unable and unwilling to remain what it is. This isn't necessarily a question of startling declarations or 'radical' actions, but rather of all the practices which proletarians use to 'escape' or deny their own condition: the suicidal struggles at Cellatex<sup>192</sup>, the strike

---

192 Cellatex was a textile mill in northern France that was threatened with closure in 2000. The workers occupied, briefly held officials hostage and threatened to blow up the plant which was full of poisonous and explosive chemicals. With banners reading 'We'll go all the way... boom boom.' they demonstrated their seriousness to the media by setting off small explosions and tossing chemicals into large fires in

at Vilvoorde<sup>193</sup>, and many others where it is immediately apparent that the proletariat is nothing separate from capital and that it cannot remain nothing (that it demands to be reunited with capital neither fills in the abyss opened up by the struggle, nor suppresses the recognition and refusal on the part of the proletariat of itself as this abyss).

Theories of self-organisation or autonomy identify the being of the working class in the capitalist mode of production as the content of communism. It is 'enough' to liberate this being from the alien domination of capital (alien, since the proletariat is autonomous). Autonomy in itself fixes the revolution as affirmation of labour and defines the communist reorganisation of relations between individuals on this basis. Most critiques of self-organisation remain formal critiques, they merely state: self-organisation isn't 'good in itself' but is only the form of organisation of a struggle, it is the content which counts. This criticism fails to pose the question of the form itself, and does not consider this form to be a content, nor significant in itself.

---

front of the factory gates. In a move not endearing them to environmentalists, they released some chemicals into the river and threatened more. After this they were offered and accepted a much more favourable redundancy package.

193 Renault announced the closure of the Vilvoorde factory in Belgium in 1997. In what became known as the 'eurostrike' the workers occupied the plant, managed to prevent the hauling away of, and thus held 'hostage', 4,500 new cars. They made guerilla or commando raids to spread action to French plants. They received a lot of solidarity action both from Renault workers in France and Spain and from other Belgian carworkers culminating in a giant demonstration called at short notice in Brussels. After this the French Prime Minister came on to television to announce a big increase in the payoff to the workers.

If autonomy disappears as a perspective it is because the revolution can only have the communisation of society as its content, that is to say the abolition of the proletariat. With such a content, it becomes inappropriate to speak of autonomy and it is unlikely that such a programme would involve what is commonly understood as 'autonomous organisation'. The proletariat 'recognises itself as class', it recognises itself in this way in every conflict and even more so in a situation where its existence as a class is the situation it will have to confront. It is the content of this 'recognition' that must not be mistaken, nor must we continue to envisage it using categories from the old cycle as if these proceeded from themselves as natural forms of the class struggle. For the proletariat to recognise itself as a class won't be to 'return to itself', rather it will be a total extroversion in recognising itself as a category of the capitalist mode of production. In the conflict this 'recognition' will in fact be a practical knowledge of capital.

## **2) THE FOUNDATION OF THE POSSIBILITY OF A SECOND PHASE OF REAL SUBSUMPTION IN THE CONCEPT OF CAPITAL AND REAL SUBSUMPTION.**

The current restructuring is a second phase of the real subsumption of labour under capital. We will explain ourselves briefly here with canonical Marxian references on the subject from *Capital*, from the *Grundrisse*, from the Missing Sixth Chapter. We can't amalgamate or put on the same level absolute surplus-value and formal subsumption, or relative surplus-value and real subsumption. That is to say we can't confuse a conceptual determination of capital and a historical configuration. Relative surplus-value is the principle unifying the two phases of real subsumption. In this manner real subsumption has a history because it has a dynamic principle which forms it, makes it evolve, poses certain forms of the process of valorisation or circulation as fetters and transforms them. Relative surplus-value, which affects the work process and all social combinations of the relation between the proletariat and capital, and

consequently the relation between capitals, is what allows a continuity to be posed between the phases of real subsumption.

The first point then is to avoid amalgamating the forms of extraction of surplus-value and the historical configurations which relate to the concepts of formal and real subsumption. The second point consists of seeing the difference in the relation between absolute surplus-value and formal subsumption on the one hand and between relative surplus-value and real subsumption on the other. It is contained in the concept itself that the extraction of surplus-value in its absolute mode can be understood only on the level of the work process. Capital takes over an existing labour process which it lengthens and intensifies; at most it is content to regroup the workers. The relation between the extraction of surplus-value in its relative mode and real subsumption is much more complex. We can't be satisfied with defining real subsumption only on the level of transformations of the labour process. In fact for the introduction of machines to be synonymous with the growth in surplus-value in its relative mode, the increase in productivity which this introduction causes would have to affect the goods entering into the consumption of the working class. This necessitates the disappearance of small-scale agriculture, and capital's hold over Department 2 of production (that of means of consumption). This occurs, in its evolution, well after the introduction of machines in the labour process. But even this capitalist development in Department 2 must not be seized upon without reservations. In fact French and even English textile production at the beginning of the 19th century was mostly not destined for workers' consumption, but was sold on rural markets (and so depended on agricultural cycles), on the urban middle class market, or for export (cf. Rosier and Dockés, *Rythmes économiques* and Braudel and Labrousse, *Histoire économique et sociale de la France*, vol. 2). The extraction of relative surplus-value affects all social combinations, from the labour process to the political forms of workers' representation,

passing through the integration of the reproduction of labour-power in the cycle of capital, the role of the credit system, the constitution of a specifically capitalist world market (not only merchant capitalist), the subordination of science (this subsumption of society occurs at different rhythms in different countries; historically Britain played a pioneer role). Real subsumption is a transformation of society and not of the labour process alone.

We can only speak of real subsumption at the moment when all social combinations are affected. The process whereby totality is affected has its own criterion. Real subsumption becomes an organic system; that is to say it proceeds from its own presuppositions in order to create from itself the organs which are necessary to it; this is how it becomes a totality. Real subsumption conditions itself, whereas formal subsumption transforms and models a pre-existing social and economic fabric according to the interests and needs of capital.

This allows us to introduce a third point: the real subsumption of labour (and thus of society) under capital is by its nature always unfinished. It is in the nature of real subsumption to reach points of rupture because real subsumption overdetermines the crises of capital as an unfinished quality of capitalist society. This was the case in the creation by capital of the specific organs and modalities of the absorption of social labour-power of the first phase of real subsumption. Real subsumption is by nature a perpetual self-construction punctuated by crises; the principle of this self-construction resides in its basic principle, the extraction of surplus-value in its relative mode. But even if the current restructuring can be considered to have been accomplished, it is a defining element of the period. Restructuring will never be complete in the sense that the policies of restructuring are exhausted. On the contrary they will be pursued in a sustained manner, the '[neo-]liberal offensive' won't stop, it will always have new rigidities to overturn. It is the same for world capitalist

integration which constantly has to be redefined by pressures between allies and policing military interventions.

This permanent self-construction of real subsumption is entailed by in the extraction of surplus-value in its relative mode. From this point of view the axes which brought about the fall in the rate of profit in the previous phase offer us a vision of the elements which capital had to abolish, transform, or supersede in the restructuring. It is from relative surplus-value that we must start in order to understand how the first phase of real subsumption enters into crisis at the beginning of the 1970s. What was constituted in its interior as a fetter to it?

In this restructuring, the contradiction which the old cycle of struggles had thrown up is abolished and superseded – that is the contradiction between, on the one hand, labour-power created, reproduced and instrumentalised by capital in a collective and social manner, and, on the other, the forms of appropriation of this labour-power by capital, whether in the immediate production process (the assembly line, the system of the ‘big factory’), in the process of reproduction of labour-power (welfare) or in the relation between capitals (national areas of capital distribution [péréquation]). This was the situation of conflict which manifested itself as workers’ identity confirmed in the very reproduction of capital. It was the architectural separation between the integration of the reproduction of labour-power and the transformation of surplus-value into additional capital and finally the increase in surplus-value in its relative mode, which became a fetter on valorisation on the basis of relative surplus-value. This means ultimately the way in which capital, as organic system, constituted itself as society.

This non-coincidence between production and reproduction was the basis of the formation and confirmation within the reproduction of capital of a workers’ identity. Workers’ identity allowed for a hiatus between the production of surplus-value and the reproduction of the social relation,

a hiatus enabling competition between two hegemonies, two forms of management, two forms of control of reproduction. For relative surplus value and its three definitive determinations (the labour process, the integration of the reproduction of labour-power, the distribution of the total capital [péréquation]) to be adequate to each other, there necessarily has to be a coincidence between production and reproduction; as a corollary, this necessarily implies a coalescence between the constitution and the reproduction of the proletariat as class on the one side and its contradiction with capital on the other.

It is clear that the passage from one phase of real subsumption to another cannot have the same amplitude as the passage from formal to real subsumption, but we can't be satisfied with merely positing a continuity between the two phases of real subsumption; a process of revelation to capital of its own truth. The change would then merely be the elimination of archaisms; the transformation would only be formal in this case, fundamentally changing nothing of the contradiction between proletariat and capital. Even the very notion of a crisis between the two phases would disappear. We wouldn't be passing from one particular configuration of the contradiction to another, and the notion of restructuring would disappear by the same count.

It will however be necessary to take all this up again in the much more 'empirical' way called for by your pertinent remarks on the periodisation presented by TC. You raise, amongst other problems, a question that we had completely left to one side, namely that of the criterion for the dominance of a mode of valorisation of capital. I haven't got a categorical response to give you. I think that it is necessary, of course, to take into account a study of the labour processes, but, as I attempt to show in my response, that can't be sufficient. I think that as far as real subsumption is concerned, the criterion for its dominance has to be sought out in the modalities of reproduction of labour-power (social and political modalities):



social welfare systems, the invention of the category of the unemployed, the importance of trade unionism, etc. All this naturally accompanies the transformations in the labour process: the decline of handicrafts and domestic industry caused by the first phase of large-scale industry. In order for there to be real subsumption, according to my view, modalities of reproduction of labour-power must be created which are adequate to the transformations accomplished in the labour process. That is to say those modalities which ensure (and confirm) that labour-power no longer has any possible 'ways out' of its exchange with capital in the framework of this specifically capitalist labour process.

Some quotations, not so as to claim any orthodoxy, but to illustrate my thesis.

For capitalist relations to establish themselves at all presupposes that a certain historical level of social production has been attained. Even within the framework of an earlier mode of production certain needs and certain means of communication and production must have developed which go beyond the old relations of production and coerce them into the capitalist mould. But for the time being they need to be developed only to the point that permits the formal subsumption of labour under capital. On the basis of that change, however, specific changes in the mode of production are introduced which create new forces of production, and these in turn influence the mode of production so that new real conditions come into being. Thus a complete economic revolution is brought about. On the one hand, it creates the real conditions for the domination of labour for capital, perfecting the process and providing it with the appropriate framework. On the other hand, by evolving conditions of production and communication and productive forces of labour antagonistic to the workers involved in them, this revolution creates the real premises of a new mode of production, one that abolishes the contradictory

form of capitalism. It thereby creates the material basis of a newly shaped social process and hence of a new social formation. (Missing Sixth Chapter p.1064)

It must be kept in mind that the new forces of production and relations of production do not develop out of nothing, nor drop from the sky, nor from the womb of the self-positing Idea; but from within and in antithesis to the existing development of production and the inherited, traditional relations of property. While in the completed bourgeois system every economic relation presupposes every other in its bourgeois economic form, and everything posited is thus also a presupposition, this is the case with every organic system. This organic system itself, as a totality, has its presuppositions, and its development to its totality consists precisely in subordinating all elements of society to itself, or in creating out of it the organs which it still lacks. This is historically how it becomes a totality. (Grundrisse p.278)

If we consider bourgeois society as a whole, society always appears as the last result of the process, i.e. man in his social relations.' (Grundrisse - quote translated from french)

It seems to me that it is not possible to understand the real subsumption of labour under capital without considering that what occurs in the labour process only resolves itself outside of it. Capital, as society (in the sense that the two preceding quotes seek to define), is a perpetual work of the formation of its inherent contradictions at the level of its reproduction which undergoes phases of profound mutations. It is possible to go so far as to say that the real subsumption of labour under capital is defined as capital becoming capitalist society, i.e. presupposing itself in its evolution and in the creation of its organs. It is for this reason that real subsumption is a historical period whose indicative historical limits can be fixed. Beyond this, as you emphasise, there will always be transformations, but these are

made on the achieved basis of capitalist society which is implied in the very concept of the extraction of surplus value in its relative form.

Finally, for the sake of argument if I were to accept all your criticisms of the utilisation we make of the concept of real subsumption and we were to abandon, for the period which has opened up, the denomination 'second phase of real subsumption', that would change a lot of things, but not the essential content of what we are saying: there has been a restructuring of the relation of exploitation, of the contradiction between proletariat and capital. That is what is essential, and this is what must be discussed.

### **3) ON ALIENATION**

It's clear that we often mean the same thing by the different terms 'alienation' and 'exploitation': the subsumption of labour under capital, reciprocal implication, the self-presupposition of capital. My critique of the concept of alienation is not a 'war' on the utilisation of the term; we in TC use the term ourselves, and in Critical Foundations... I use the concept of alienated labour or the alienation of labour. My critique bears explicitly upon the Hegelian or Feuerbachian usage of the concept that quickly pollutes it.

You draw out in pertinent fashion the numerous utilisations of the concept of alienation in the Grundrisse, the Missing Sixth Chapter, etc. I maintain however that it is not the same concept as in the 1844 Manuscripts. Whereas in the Manuscripts the concept of alienation is the very explanatory dynamic of the reality it is given the job of explaining, in the texts you cite alienation is the thing that is being explained. It is submitted to the concept of the capitalist mode of production; we are far from the total explanatory power of 'alienated labour' of the 1844 Manuscripts:

To the extent that, from the standpoint of capital and wage labour, the creation of the objective body of activity happens in antithesis to the

immediate labour capacity -- that this process of objectification in fact appears as a process of dispossession from the standpoint of labour or as appropriation of alien labour from the standpoint of capital -- to that extent, this twisting and inversion [Verdrehung und Verkehrung] is a real [phenomenon], not a merely supposed one existing merely in the imagination of the workers and the capitalists. But obviously this process of inversion is a merely historical necessity, a necessity for the development of the forces of production solely from a specific historic point of departure, or basis (Grundrisse p.831-832).

Alienation is no longer the primary concept in which all the others have their origin; this concept rather results from the production relation of capital, and not the inverse:

Thus, the question whether capital is productive or not is absurd. Labour itself is productive only if absorbed into capital, where capital forms the basis of production, and where the capitalist is therefore in command of production. The productivity of labour becomes the productive force of capital just as the general exchange value of commodities fixes itself in money. Labour, such as it exists for itself in the worker in opposition to capital, that is, labour in its immediate being, separated from capital, is not productive. Nor does it ever become productive as an activity of the worker so long as it merely enters the simple, only formally transforming process of circulation. Therefore, those who demonstrate that the productive force ascribed to capital is a displacement, a transposition of the productive force of labour, forget precisely that capital itself is essentially this displacement, this transposition, and that wage labour as such presupposes capital, so that, from its standpoint as well, capital is this transubstantiation; the necessary process of positing its own powers as alien to the worker.' (Grundrisse, p.308).

Let's compare with the Manuscripts:

We have considered the act of estrangement of practical human activity, of labour, from two aspects: (1) the relationship of the worker to the product of labour as an alien object that has power over him. (...) (2) The relationship of labour to the act of production within labour. This relationship is the relationship of the worker to his own activity as something which is alien and does not belong to him ... (1844 Manuscripts, p.327).

It is true that we took the concept of alienated labour (alienated life) from political economy as a result of the movement of private property. But it is clear from an analysis of this concept that, although private property appears as the basis and cause of alienated labour, it is in fact its consequence, just as the gods were originally not the cause but the effect of the confusion in men's minds. Later, however, this relationship becomes reciprocal. It is only when the development of private property reaches its ultimate point of culmination that this, its secret, re-emerges; namely, that is (a) the product of alienated labour, and (b) the means through which labour is alienated, the realization of this alienation.' (1844 Manuscripts, p. 332).

I know I'm only dealing with a translation, but supposing it is a correct one, the pronominal form in 'labour alienates itself' constitutes it as the creative power of social relations, which confirms the 'realization' which follows in the sentence.

I won't complicate things with long commentaries. It seems to me that from one text to the other, we are no longer talking about the same thing. In the Manuscripts, alienation is the first principle, and is explanatory, because the reference is the becoming of the human essence (its loss etc.). In the other texts alienation is itself explained by the relations of production, it describes a situation. In the quotes from the Grundrisse,

the alienation of labour exists in the production relation of capital. It is not alienated labour, manifestation of man turning against him, which creates this relation; we have two real poles which confront each other and not only one, a labour which alienates itself 'within itself'. In the *Grundrisse* there are classes which are real subjects confronting each other in their reciprocal implication. In the *Manuscripts*, there are no classes and no reciprocal implication, but a subject which divides itself.

It is significant that you yourselves return to the search for this single subject which divides itself: 'Capital then is not just objectivised labour, both 'objectivised labour' and subjective labour without objectivity are socially created forms into which the unity of the social individual is split [my emphasis]' (*Aufheben* 12 p.41); 'In the alienation the subject exists on both sides as proletariat and as capital for capital is in a real sense simply the alienated powers of humanity.' (*ibid.* p.42 my emphasis). Revolution is then: 'a uniting of the fragmented social individual' (*ibid.* p.43). From this it follows that classes are the schism of a single subject.

It seems to me that you've got yourselves into a bit of a mess with this 'return to self of the subject'. You say: 'In a sense the subject who returns to itself is humanity not the proletariat, but this is a humanity that didn't exist before the alienation; it has come to be through alienation. [...] Thus the subject is not the proletariat nor a pre-existing humanity; the subject does not exist yet apart from the fragmented social individual produced in capitalism' (*ibid.* p.43). In a word, this means that alienation produces the subject that alienates itself – a tautology – but furthermore we have a right to ask ourselves what is this alienation which does the producing? Having no pre-existing subject, it is alienation itself that becomes subject. In no speculative theory of alienation do we encounter a pre-existing subject (i.e. one having existed concretely and historically – the fables of 'primitive communism' are pretty much out of fashion now) that alienates itself, but instead what we have is schism as its own movement. This movement

is the unity that subsumes the elements that are divided. This is precisely where we have the whole speculative character of the concept. You write: 'The humanity from which we are alienated is a humanity which is not yet.' (ibid.). The formulation is quite obscure to me. How can a thing that doesn't exist yet be a manifestation of myself that is currently alien to me? If such a thing is possible, it's because this thing which doesn't exist does actually exist: 'There is a coming to be of humanity through alienation.' (ibid.). It doesn't exist, but it does nevertheless because it is already the existing *raison d'être* of its becoming.

The cornerstone of such a construction resides in the following formulation: 'The human essence for the Marx of the 1844 Manuscripts is not a generic category, it is not fixed - it becomes. The human essence is outside the individual, in the historically determined social relations that he is immersed in.' (ibid. p.42). A first remark without great importance: it doesn't seem so obvious to me that the human essence isn't a generic category in the Manuscripts. The passage which begins 'man is a generic being because etc. etc.' doesn't seem to me to confirm this affirmation. But what is most important in these few lines is the double affirmation that they contain. On the one hand you say 'the human essence is not fixed', it becomes; on the other hand, 'the human essence is in social relations (...) it is immersed in them' (assuming a correct translation on our part<sup>194</sup>). You don't say without further ado 'the human essence is the ensemble of social relations'. We have something which is in the process

---

194 As can be seen by comparing this translated quotation with the original above, TC did in fact mistranslate this passage, construing the human essence as the thing being immersed when it was in fact the individual who was being described as immersed in the social relations. However it is debatable how much this changes the force of their criticism, for it is true that the human essence was not immediately identified with these social relations but was described as being 'in' them.

of becoming, some thing which is 'in', something which is 'immersed'. Something is still 'in the process of becoming' within something else, even if this 'something else' is merely the form that it momentarily takes on.

This formulation of 'the historical essence', of 'the essence as a process of becoming' turns to dust as soon as it is uttered.

What we have here is the conception according to which the human essence, instead of being fixed, is identical to the historical process, understood as man's self-creation in time. It is not a question of an abstract ontology (Feuerbach) but of a phylogenesis.<sup>195</sup> That doesn't prevent it, like any phylogenesis, from relating back to and being in conflict with an ontology.

The simple fact of conceiving historical development as human essence (in general this proposition is presented the other way round – the human essence as historical becoming – whereby it appears less speculative) supposes that the a priori categories of this essence have been defined (if we say that these categories are given by history, then we are just going round in a circle). Such categories are realized, even if we stretch subtlety to the point of saying that they only exist in realizing themselves, i.e. as history. Here of course it is a matter of the definition of man as generic being and of the attributes of this being: universality, consciousness, freedom. The human essence is no longer abstract, in the sense that it is now formed and defined outside of its being and of its existence, but that doesn't prevent it from only functioning in its identity with history by assuming that it has within it a hard core of categories which form the basis, like it or not, of an ontology. This essence that is identical to history functions upon the binary: substance (the hard core) and tendency. The tendency is merely the retrospective abstraction of the result to which the hard core cannot

---

195      Phylogenesis: (biology) the sequence of events involved in the evolutionary development and history of a species of organism or social group.



escape bringing us. Thus the essence that is identical to history necessarily produces a teleology, in other words the disappearance of history.

The teleological development is contained within the very premises. The point of departure, given in the notion of generic being and in its attributes, is the problematic of subject and object, of thought and being, which is at the foundations of all philosophy. This means that we can give whatever answer imaginable, but it is in the question that the mystification resides. If we accord primacy to the subject we are 'idealist', if we accord it to the object (nature in the philosophical sense) we are 'materialist'. Feuerbach, and following him Marx in the Manuscripts, attempts to go beyond this alternative in the name of 'concrete humanism' or 'naturalism'. Hence the definition that Marx provides in the 1844 Manuscripts:

Man is directly a natural being. As a natural being, and as a living natural being, he is on the one hand equipped with natural powers, with vital powers, he is an active natural being; these powers exist in him as dispositions and capacities, as drives. On the other hand, as a natural, corporeal, sensuous, objective being, he is a suffering, conditioned, and limited being, like animals and plants. That is to say, the objects of his drives exist outside him as objects independent of him; but these objects are objects of his need, essential objects, indispensable to the exercise and confirmation of his essential powers. To say that man is a corporeal, living, real, sensuous, objective being with natural powers means that he has real, sensuous objects as the object of his being and of his vital expression, or that he can only express his life in real, sensuous objects (...) A being which does not have its nature outside itself is not a natural being and plays no part in the system of nature. A being which has no object outside itself is not an objective being. A being which is not itself an object for some third being has no being for its object, i.e., it is not objectively related. Its being is not objective. A non-objective being is a non-being. (op.cit., p389-90).

However Marx does not take this fused identity of subject and object, this consubstantiality, as something given, but as something historical. This is what the famous passage in the Manuscripts on ‘the human eye’ indicates, a passage directly lifted from a paragraph in *The Philosophy of the Future* by Feuerbach, who simply stated: ‘the object of the eye is light and not sound or smell, it is through this object that the eye reveals its essence to us.’ It is the application of this basic principle: the object of a being is its essence, whereby its being – the conditions of existence of the essence – is its essence, which Marx criticizes in *The German Ideology* as an apology for the existing state of things. However (second ‘however’ which brings us back to the subject-object which is identical in itself of the previous paragraph, only enriched), this historical becoming is nothing but an optical illusion. In fact the becoming is a becoming adequate.

The identity of subject and object which is in itself (the very definition of the subject) can’t help but become a coincidence for itself (alienation is the middle term).

But man is not only a natural being; he is a human natural being; i.e., he is a being for himself and hence a species-being, as which he must confirm and realize himself both in his being and in his knowing. Consequently, human objects are not natural objects as they immediately present themselves, nor is human sense, in its immediate and objective existence, human sensibility and human objectivity. Neither objective nor subjective nature is immediately present in a form adequate to the human being. And as everything natural must come into being, so man also has his process of origin in history. But for him history is a conscious process, and hence one which consciously superseded itself. History is the true natural history of man. (We shall return to this later.) (Marx, 1844 Manuscripts, p.391).<sup>196</sup>

---

196 This passage was actually crossed out in the manuscript.

Fortunately he returned to his senses and so never had to return to it later. We have here an identical subject-object, but as a natural human being. This identical subject-object can only immediately be identical in itself; as human, this natural being is a generic being, i.e. it takes itself as object. It follows that the object which defines it in itself in their identity, must become 'in and for itself'. We can easily recognise here the schema of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. The subject is at first identical with its object, as exterior object (consciousness as knowledge of an exterior object: consciousness); next, the subject as its own object (consciousness as the very knowledge of myself: self-consciousness); finally, the subject is identical to its exterior object and to itself in this object (consciousness as knowledge of thought, something which is at the same time objective and interior: reason). History, then, is but a middle term, a moment posited a priori in the definition of the human essence; it is thus obvious that this human essence is the becoming to the extent that it is in fact the becoming which is part of the human essence, and which is already posited in it.

There is a text by Marcuse which illustrates this difficulty particularly well: *New Sources on the Foundation of Historical Materialism*<sup>197</sup> published in 1932 (after his discovery of the Manuscripts):

For Marx, essence and factuality, the situation of essential history and the situation of factual history [i.e. the development of the essence of man and the succession of social forms, a distinction that Marx consigns to the dustbin of history in *The German Ideology*, by showing that the first term is nothing other than the philosophical vision of the second – author's note] are precisely not separate regions or levels, independent of each other: the historicity of man is included in his essential determination... But the knowledge of the historicity

---

197      Published in English in the Verso anthology *From Luther to Popper*. We were unable to find a copy and so publish here a translation from the French.

of historical existence in no way identifies the essential history of man with his factual history. We have already seen that man is not immediately 'one with his activity', but that he 'distinguishes' himself from it, that he 'has a relation' to it. In his case, essence and existence separate themselves: his existence is a 'means' of the realisation of his essence, or, in the case of alienation, his being is a means of his simple physical existence. If essence and existence are separate at this point, and if their reunification as *de facto* realisation is the truly free mission of human praxis, then, to the extent that factuality has installed itself to the point of completely perverting the human essence, the radical suppression of this factuality is the absolute mission. It is precisely the unfailing consideration of the essence of man which becomes the implacable motor of the justification of the radical revolution: it is not only a question of an economic or political crisis [written in 1932 – author's note] in the factual situation of capitalism, but also of a catastrophe of the human essence. To understand this is to condemn to failure in advance and without reservation any purely economic or political reform and to demand unconditionally the catastrophic suppression of the factual status quo by total revolution.

Such a discourse constantly contradicts itself. The historicity of the human essence (and its alienation) is belied by the unfailing consideration of 'the essence of man', which is the *raison d'être* of its historicity (a veritable contradiction in terms) and to which we are constantly referred back, as if to an ultimate standard.

This conception of the human essence as historical becoming leads you to a reading that I absolutely do not share of the quotation you take from the Missing Sixth Chapter: 'This is exactly the same relation in the sphere of material production, in the real social life process — for this is the production process — as is represented by religion in the ideological sphere: the inversion of the subject into the object and vice versa. Looked

at historically this inversion appears as the point of entry necessary in order to enforce, at the expense of the majority, the creation of wealth as such, i.e. the ruthless development of the productive powers of social labour, which alone can form the material basis for a free human society. It is necessary to pass through this antagonistic form, just as man had first to shape his spiritual forces in a religious form, as powers independent of him.' (p.990). If one wishes to talk, as you do, of this text in terms of 'the necessity of alienation', then the question must be asked of the status of this necessity. In this quote, the question doesn't relate back to that of the Manuscripts. The question of 'the necessity of alienation' in the Manuscripts revolves around: how (and what's worse, why) does labour come to alienate itself? Here, in the Missing Sixth Chapter, the question is one of how this epoch of capital produces its own disappearance. We have passed from a speculative question to a historical one. Not to see this difference means that the course of history, which is properly understood as production, is only understood as a realization.

I don't understand why you didn't continue the quote from the Missing Sixth Chapter that you put forward, because what follows seems initially to back up your thesis remarkably well.

It is the alienation process of his own labour. To that extent, the worker here stands higher than the capitalist from the outset, in that the latter is rooted in that alienation process and finds in it his absolute satisfaction, whereas the worker, as its victim, stands from the outset in a relation of rebellion towards it and perceives it as a process of enslavement.' (Missing Sixth Chapter, p. 990).

These few lines seem to be reminiscent of the famous paragraph from the Holy Family that you cite elsewhere. But, here too, let us compare. The 'process of the alienation of labour' (Missing Sixth Chapter) comes to replace 'the same alienation of man' (Holy Family); the capitalist is

‘plunged into a process of alienation’ (Missing Sixth Chapter), whereas previously it was a question of his ‘alienation of himself’ (Holy Family) through which he was to acquire ‘the illusion of a human existence’ (Holy Family); the workers in the Missing Sixth Chapter are ‘victims’, ‘in a situation of rebellion’, as if in ‘slavery’, whereas in the Holy Family, the ‘proletarian class’ found in alienation ‘the reality of an inhuman existence’ or ‘the contradiction which exists between his human nature and his real condition which is the frank, categorical, total negation of this nature’; all this is replaced by the simple situation of the worker who is ‘victim’ and rebels because he is in this situation. In the Missing Sixth Chapter, the text continues as follows: ‘...the capitalist is just as enslaved to capital [because his obsession is the self-valorisation of capital – author’s note] as the worker at the opposite pole’. Here, the common ‘enslavement to capital’ has replaced ‘the same alienation of man’. I won’t comment on the explicit reference to Hegel which is made in the Holy Family, I think that the simple comparison of the two texts, which freely echo each other in obvious fashion, is sufficient for my exposition.

I will now place the quotation you make of the Missing Sixth Chapter in relation to another from the same work:

The view outlined here diverges sharply from the one current among bourgeois economists imprisoned within capitalist ways of thought. Such thinkers do indeed realize how production takes place within capitalist relations. But they do not understand how these relations are themselves produced, together with the material preconditions of their dissolution. They do not see, therefore, that their historical justification as a necessary form of economic development and of the production of social wealth may be undermined. (op. cit., p. 1065).

‘Necessity’, ‘historical justification’, ‘production of the supersession’, the terms are still there, but no longer any trace of the ‘facts without necessity’

(1844 Manuscripts) to be transcended by the concepts of Labour or Man. We are now dealing with a completely different problematic. Capital itself suppresses its own historical signification: therein lies all the difference. And when, in the new cycle of struggles, this movement is the structure and the content of the very contradiction between proletariat and capital, it is all the ideologies which were still able to support and understand this movement as alienation which necessarily collapse, including Marx's objectivism. This is the price of the theoretical supersession of programmism. To talk of an inevitable stage or passage doesn't necessarily feed into a teleology, to the extent that the supersession made possible by this stage doesn't precede it.

To understand these quotations within the problematic of the Manuscripts would lead us to think that the division of society into classes is a result of the fact that their suppression must be historically produced in a movement which abolishes its own necessity in its unfolding. Since we are now at a point where the division of society into classes can be abolished, we are to believe that all of past history had just that as its goal; the suppression of classes becomes the very reason of their origin. This entire problematic, which consists of searching for a cause, an origin of the division of society into classes, proceeds from the belief according to which communism is the normal state of Humanity. It really is a teleology.

It is in *The German Ideology*, following on from the *Theses on Feuerbach*, that Marx wipes the slate clean of this entire approach:

History is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which exploits the materials, the capital funds, the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding generations, and thus, on the one hand, continues the traditional activity in completely changed circumstances and, on the other, modifies the old circumstances with a completely changed activity. This can be speculatively distorted so that later history is made the goal of earlier history, e.g. the goal ascribed to the discovery of America is to further the eruption of the

French Revolution. Thereby history receives its own special aims and becomes 'a person ranking with other persons' (to wit : 'Self-Consciousness, Criticism, the Unique', etc.), while what is designated with the words 'destiny', 'goal', 'germ', or 'idea' of earlier history is nothing more than an abstraction formed from later history, from the active influence which earlier history exercises on later history (p.60) 'This sum of productive forces, capital funds and social forms of intercourse, which every individual and generation finds in existence as something given, is the real basis of what the philosophers have conceived as 'substance' and 'essence of man', and what they have deified and attacked (p.51) 'Thus the communists in practice treat the conditions created up to now by production and intercourse as inorganic conditions, without, however, imagining that it was the plan or the destiny of previous generations to give them material (my emphasis), and without believing that these conditions were inorganic for the individuals creating them. (p.88)

As regards the method of political economy, Marx writes in the 1857 Introduction: 'What is called historical evolution depends in general on the fact that the latest form regards earlier ones as stages in the development of itself'. The process of formation of capital is certainly in relation to that which precedes it, but it is not in that which precedes it, nor is it the result of a historical trajectory having its own dynamic as *raison d'être* of the succession of historical social formations: 'its process of formation [of capital] is the process of dissolution, the process of decomposition of the social mode of production which precedes it' (Theories Of Surplus Value, quote translated from the French).

If from a philosophical point of view one considers this evolution of individuals in the common conditions of existence of estates and classes, which followed on one another, and in the accompanying



general conceptions forced upon them, it is certainly very easy to imagine that in these individuals the species, or 'Man', has evolved, or that they evolved 'Man' — and in this way one can give history some hard clouts on the ear. One can conceive these various estates and classes to be specific terms of the general expression, subordinate varieties of the species, or evolutionary phases of 'Man' (The German Ideology, Chapter 4)

And finally:

The individuals, who are no longer subject to the division of labour, have been conceived by the philosophers as an ideal, under the name 'Man. They have conceived the whole process which we have outlined as the evolutionary process of 'Man', so that at every historical stage 'Man' was substituted for the individuals and shown as the motive force of history. The whole process was thus conceived as a process of the self-estrangement of 'Man', and this was essentially due to the fact that the average individual of the later stage was always foisted on to the earlier stage, and the consciousness of a later age on to the individuals of an earlier. (The German Ideology, p. 86)

Here we have the genetic explanation of the concept of man and the general form of the critique of all these utilisations. As soon as we lock ourselves in the aporias of alienation and Man, we can't escape succumbing to an optical illusion: this subject, this principle, is the imagined Man of communist society in relation to whom all the anterior limitations appear as absolutely contingent. The imagined individual of communist society is substituted for that of the anterior social forms; it becomes self-evident that for this individual all the anterior limits can only be contingent, which a contrario transforms this individual into a substantial transhistorical nucleus and allows the hard human nucleus to be set free, once it has, in order to become adequate to itself, accomplished all these avatars.

It is clear that this critique of teleology doesn't mean that once the proletarian condition has been abolished we pass to a different period without any relation to the previous one apart from the end of exploitation. The link with the preceding stage is constituted by the historical significance of capital which is in no way a sum of seeds, but a certain stage of the contradiction between capital and proletariat; it is a content and a structuring of the contradiction between proletariat and capital, i.e. of the course of exploitation, which resolves itself in the capacity which the proletariat finds, in the contradiction with capital, of producing communism.

If communism resolves and supersedes this separation of individual and social activity, and if all of past history, as history of the class struggle, is the history of this division, this is not to say that it was bound to end up in this supersession, nor that this history splits into two within itself: in itself as principle or abstraction (the socialisation of nature, the development of productive forces, the fragmented social individual), and in itself as concrete history. This division is not the *raison d'être* of its own history, which means that it doesn't carry its own supersession within itself like a hidden quality that it is to deploy as history until communism. Something mysterious is conferred on history by trying paradoxically to explain it, to give an account of it, by the deployment of a 'hidden' quality, an original potentiality. It is not the nature of labour, a constraint on the development of the productive forces or the self-alienation of labour, which produces the division of society, rather it is the division of society which we have at the beginning and which we have as our point of departure.

This separation has neither conceptual nor historical (chronological) origin; the search for the origin always consists of positing a single reality, not yet divided, i.e. not seeking a comprehension of history, but something before history. Whether we consider this something to be an abstraction or a historical reality, it only remains to convert each historical fact, each period, into the chosen original formula according to the following principle:

Mr Lange (On the workers' question, etc., 2nd edition) pays me great compliments, but with the object of increasing his own importance. Mr Lange, you see, has made a great discovery. All history may be subsumed in one single great natural law. This natural law is the phrase (— the Darwinian expression becomes, in this application, just a phrase —) 'struggle for life', and the content of this phrase is the Malthusian law of population, or rather over-population. Thus, instead of analysing this 'struggle for life' as it manifests itself historically in various specific forms of society, all that need be done is to transpose every given struggle into the phrase 'struggle for life', and then this phrase into the Malthusian 'population fantasy'. It must be admitted that this is a very rewarding method — for stilted, mock-scientific, highfaluting ignorance and intellectual laziness. (Marx, Letters to Kugelmann, June 1870).

But let's call a truce in our marxology and pedantry – I hope we'll have another chance to distinguish ourselves in these two domains. I would like to finish these complements to my reply by broaching a question which neither you, in your text on TC, nor we, in our reply, raise. I'm referring to the question of what is at stake in this dispute over alienation and humanity. I think that what's at stake resides (as always) in our understanding of capital and the contradiction between proletariat and capital, i.e. in the understanding of class struggle inasmuch as it is the process of production of communism. It seems to me that your conception of alienation leads you to understand the contradiction between the proletariat and capital as a transitional phase in a process of which it is but an element, a moment, which has its *raison d'être* outside itself; a moment of realization of a more 'global' and truly efficient contradiction. The contradiction between the proletariat and capital is the necessary moment in order to realize a communist supersession, but in fact it is just because in it the alienation of humanity has taken on a form that renders it surmountable. If, as in

the Manuscripts, you have an alienation of Man, an alienation which is an anthropology, you can only be coherent if you have a transhistoric 'need for communism'.

What's at stake here resides in our capacity to take the events of the course of the class struggle as concrete, finite events, and not as the manifestation of an historical line which transcends them. The 'end' is produced; it is not already the hidden meaning of the movement. What is at stake is our existence in the immediate struggles and our relation to them. The teleological problematic of alienation dispenses with the need to confront the real, historical developments of capital for themselves, and the class struggles for themselves. It prevents us from conceiving these latter as really productive of history and theory. This problematic supposes that the question of the relation of class struggle and revolution is always already resolved (that's the way you understand, for example, the quote from the Missing Sixth Chapter which has been the subject of much of our debate up to now).

I'll be straight to the point and *ad hominem*. To maintain the concept of alienation, with the acceptance which you have of this, allows you to maintain an abstract vision of autonomy and self-organisation (the true being of the proletariat), in spite of its historical collapse; and to continue to navigate (more or less comfortably) inside the direct action movement, as the critical consciousness of its shortcomings, i.e. whilst accepting its premises. Your texts such as those on 'Reclaim the Streets' or on the 'direct action movement' demonstrate well the desire to take on the analysis of current struggles in a concrete way. But your analyses weigh up the 'pros' and 'cons' of these movements. You don't broach the questions of the 'why' of these movements, of their 'existence', of what they contribute theoretically, of their existence as definitive of a period. Your general problematic doesn't prompt you to consider them as the very historical product of the contradiction between proletariat and capital and this

contradiction as what these movements and these struggles are. It doesn't prompt you to take them all together as a whole, but instead to judge their different aspects. In a word, it doesn't prompt you to understand and periodise a veritable concrete history of the cycles of struggles because the problematic of alienation is definitively a problematic of the revolutionary nature of the proletariat.

In friendship,  
for *Théorie Communiste*  
R.S.

# Appendix

## Chris Arthur vs Theorie Communiste on alienation

### NOTES ON TC FIRST LETTER

This is a very interesting discussion carried on at a high level your contribution so far on is splendid naturally I agree more with you than with Simon.

I have to say that the last chapter of my book, and by implication Marx's 1844 Manuscript, is defective in that the self positing character of capital is not theorised. Since that time I have been working on that side of the problem. I think we have to differentiate between different levels of analysis.

We should not be ashamed of being humanist. Humanism is only a problem if it is understood ahistorically. However, historicity is precisely the main dimension of the human, self changing is of the essence, the other main dimension being sociality. It follows that every social system that sets man against man is alienating. Likewise any social system that prevents the great body of people from creative activity is also alienating.

Humanity and history and society are clearly categories that are universal whereas capital and wage labor pertain to a specific epoch which in human history represents a peak of alienation and a peak of social schism. It follows that this system is an epoch of alienation. It is a reasonable question to ask how did humanity alienate itself and how on a daily basis does it reproduce its alienation. The answer has something to do with the constitution of a social relation characterized by a social division of labor. Within this context the autonomisation of a value results in the self positing activity of capital simultaneously constituting labour as alienated. But this is at a lower level of abstraction than the broad dialectic of history. I have myself

been accused of Objectivism because of the stress in my recent works on the objective logic of the capital form but I still think that it would be a great error to pose capital as an external force confronting labour. It is an historical product that is to be superseded.

It is interesting you are accused of neglecting exploitation in favor of alienation. I myself have been so accused especially with reference to my chapter on labor and negativity. I agree that many of the concepts Simon likes seem to me to presuppose the category of alienation. I especially like your formulation alienation characteristically exists on both sides of the capital relation; in such a relation an abstract Objectivity confronts an abstract Subjectivity and the mediation of exchange precisely constitutes what I call in my books a second alienation overcoming a split resulting from a primary alienation.

In the same light this split into classes is the spitting of a single subject society in a sense ; albeit that as Marx says one class tries to maintain the existing relations while another class is forced into a struggle to abolish the relation and thereby itself as a class. It is strange to me that Simon quotes from the '6th Chapter' and even gives a bit from his own book, pages 512 to 530, which seem to me to imply the kind of identity between capital and labor to which he objects when he insists on the exteriority of the poles. The same thing happens a bit later when he quotes from the *Grundrisse* and quotes himself from page 92. Once again these passages surely refer to alienation.

The question of what is to be explained and what is explanatory is very interesting. I shall respond later to this second letter of his. The question of what is to be explained and what is explanatory is very interesting. I shall respond later to this in the second letter of his.

### NOTES ON TC SECOND LETTER

TC try to frighten us with 'bad words' such as 'ontology'; 'speculation'; 'self-alienation'; etc. And even 'activity' in the extract from TC 17.

1. Ontology. As I argue in my book *Dialectics of Labour* this is unavoidable; all social theory has explicit or implicit ontological commitments. Is society atoms? A whole? Relational? (if so internal or external R?)

Marx's T of F is largely an exercise in social ontology, including the 6th. Indeed the 6th is rather inadequate, ontologically speaking, because it is limited to anthropology and misses out the key ontological relation, namely that to the object (discounting the implicit 'man is an object to man'). The fact is that human being cannot be understood outside its objective relations and human development cannot be explained solely by reference to social relations, it requires reference to material reproduction, i.e. taking an object and working it up into a human form. For Marx human being characteristically distinguishes itself by a) history (self-changing=changing of circumstances) b) sociality (6th thesis) c) productive activity (historical materialism).

2. Alienation. It follows that from the three dimensions just noted there is alienation if there is a) one-dimensionality b) asocial sociality (cf. Kant) c) most people are condemned to 'labour' in the sense of machine-like 'work' (the critique of work - see below).

It is perfectly true that this conceptualisation is purely descriptive. This raises the issue of explanation which Marx himself raises in 1844 (and which I study in my book). Marx makes two moves. a) he claims to have gone beyond CPE which take private property as a given fact so that even their LTV remains trapped within the bourgeois horizon because productive activity is considered as typically wage labour. Marx problematises PP (=Kapital) by saying that to take this as given is to fetishize a social form of productive activity which has to be seen as just the result of alienated labour in the double sense of being a historical product and one sustained through daily alienation. b) but whence this alienation? he asks. He has no answer to speak of here (altho' there is a bit more in the GI. In the GI the system of PP is reduced to the social division of labour.). However



we may say that the 'original sin' is **separation** (*Trennung*) with double reference. (See stuff in my book also). Marx is very clear in the *Grundrisse* that the normal state is unity and community. (Historical note; alienation always caused pain at every stage of its development; see Aristotle on money and the indignation at the alienation of the land which separated people from their very conditions of existence.) Unity does not have to be explained he says; it is separation that has to be explained. Separation in the social division of labour (initially simply trade between communities) eventually leads to the separation of the worker from the object. This is the primary alienation. Then I stress in my book this alienation has to be overcome by a 'second alienation' i.e. exchange, the value form, money, the capital relation, etc. Here dissociation is sublated but preserved as the alienated condition reproduced through the activity of second alienation.

Now, why couldn't Marx finish the line of thought in 1844? Because he lacked any understanding of how such second alienation develops; he could not explain then the true nature of the power of capital as a self-constituting power. He knew the capital relation reproduced alienation but he didn't yet understand how it did this.

Before going on to this more concrete question I need to finish the discussion of wholeness and separation. [the next bit is from my 'Napoleoni on Labour and Exploitation', *Rivista di Politica Economica*, April/May 1999]

In Hegel's logic separation gives rise to contradiction in that a relation between the separated items is possible only if each term identifies with the other term in such a way that each becomes the opposite of itself. For if what belongs together is separated for some reason, a relationship established on the very basis of such a real estrangement can only be secured in a contradictory way, as a result of a further alienation. If the basic separation of the workers from their object is overcome through wage labour this is such a 'second alienation' solution; worker and object

are brought together, but *within* a system of estrangement, hence the mediating movement is that of labour *alienating* itself.

Let us name names. When we talk of the separation of the worker from the object what we are addressing is the presupposition of the private property system. In 1844 Marx elucidated this in a wonderfully dialectical passage:

The relationship [*Das Verhältnis*] of private property contains latent within itself the relationship of private property as *labour*, the relationship of private property as capital, and the connection of these two terms to each other. On the one hand we have the production of human activity as *labour*, that is as an activity wholly alien to itself, to man, and to nature ... the *abstract* existence of man as a mere work-man ... on the other hand, the production of the object of human activity as *capital* - wherein all the natural and social specificity of the object is extinguished ... in which the *same* capital stays the same in the most diverse natural and social instantiations [*Dasein*], totally indifferent to its real content.<sup>198</sup>

In this passage the term ‘relationship’ (*Das Verhältnis*) has implications stronger than that of terms such as ‘relation’, ‘tie’ or ‘connection’; indeed in Hegel’s *Science of Logic* ‘absolute relationship’ is one in which the sides are so closely implicated in each other that it is better to regard them as emerging from a single source and ‘ideally’ homogeneous; furthermore in this ideality each is impelled to reunify the separated sides through identifying the other as itself thus structuring the relationship as one in which it achieves self-mediation. However, if this separation is a real one (estrangement) this attempted reunification will produce a *contradictory* unity. Thus a few pages later Marx draws this conclusion:

Labour, the subjective essence of private property as exclusion of property, and capital, objective labour as exclusion of labour, constitute

---

198 Early Writings (Penguin 1975) p. 336 - translation amended.

private property in its developed relation of contradiction - hence a dynamic relationship driving towards resolution.<sup>199</sup>

Marx goes on to explain that this contradiction emerges in all its purity only with the full development of private property. In such pre-capitalist formations as the entailed estate with the specification of the worker as the property of such an estate or as the member of a particular guild, the contradiction did not exist in its abstract purity. Labour and the conditions of labour were chained together in particularised fixed units. Now each side has become free to move and has attained abstractly universal form within a systematic totality. Condensed out as abstractly opposed spheres, labour and capital, says Marx, stand in 'hostile reciprocal opposition', their contradictory unity reflected in the 'opposition of each to itself'.<sup>200</sup> On the side of the capitalist, he cannot accumulate capital except through appropriating labour, yet the wages paid out represent a sacrifice of his capital. On the other side, the labourer cannot gain a livelihood except by treating his labour power as his 'capital', a resource to be alienated.

To use the language of *Capital*: the private property relation as capital appears in the distinction between constant capital and variable capital; the private property relation as labour appears in the oppression of living labour by dead labour. But in *Capital* the relationship considered is termed the capital relation [*Kapitalverhältnis*]. This refinement of the terminology is due to two considerations. First of all, as Marx already said in 1844, the private property relation has a dialectical dynamic only in the case where it is a question of capital and wage labour.<sup>201</sup> Secondly it marks the objective fact that in the bourgeois epoch the 'principal factor' in the relationship is capital. It is the dialectic of capital itself which brings every aspect of the production process under its sway, proletarianises the

---

199      Early Writings, p.345 - translation amended.

200      Early Writings, p.341.

201      Early Writings, p.345.

working population, and accumulates wealth through exploiting them. (The same relationship considered from the opposite standpoint would be the relationship of alienated labour.) If the basic separation of the worker from the object is logically and historically the presupposition of capitalism, it is then posited as the consequence of the movement of capital itself.

[the next bit is from my 'The Contradictions of Capital' in *Defending Objectivity*, eds Archer and Outhwaite, Routledge 2004]

The capital relation is a *contradictory* unity. Any attempt to remove the contradiction ideologically by claiming 'all is capital' or 'all is labour' will find such a reductionist programme impossible to carry through coherently. Labour's alienation and capital's self-constitution are inseparable. It is of the highest importance to understand that the contradiction in the capital relation is not between capitalist and labourer (that is merely a conflict); the *inner contradiction* arises because both 'capital' and 'labour' have claims to constitute the *whole* of their relation; hence 'capital is nothing but (alienated) labour' and 'labour nothing but (variable) capital'. It is often said that productive labour is the essence lying behind the appearances of value interchanges and capital accumulation. However the many passages in which Marx assigns productive power to capital could well lead in a contrary direction: that capital is the real subject of production. As Marx said, labour appears then as 'the mediating activity' by means of which capital valorises itself.<sup>202</sup> In sum the second view is an inversion of the first. Both views are in truth correct, although contradictory. What this means is that capitalism is characterised by a *contradiction in essence*.

Each side claims to constitute the whole of their relation, reducing what is not identical with itself to its own other. At first sight the capital-labour relation appears as a two-place one, but each tries to represent the other as a *difference within itself*. Capital divides itself into constant and

---

202 Grundrisse (Penguin 1973), p. 305.

variable components; and it claims to absorb labour to itself in the shape of variable capital; for it now possesses that labour. Hence it understands the relation as a relation to itself. On the other side, living labour claims that capital is nothing but dead labour. It, too, understands the relation as a relation to itself.

But in reality these contradictory positings run into each other, such that the affirmation of the essence (whichever one) leads to its appearance in the mode of denial. Thus labour's objectification coincides with its expropriation, its positing as a moment of capital; while capital's subjectification appears as its utter dependence, not only on its personifications such as owners and managers, but on the activity of living labour. Each by being incorporated in its other becomes *other than itself*. Thus living labour is other than capital, but when subsumed under capital it is at the same time other than itself, alienated labour. The same thing happens to capital when it descends from the self-referring ideality of the forms of value to struggle with the materiality of production. But of course this process of mutual othering is not balanced. The struggle for dominance is won by capital which successfully returns from the sphere of production with surplus-value, while living labour returns from the factory exhausted and deprived of its own product. Realisation of capital is de-realisation for the worker.

As a result of labour's alienation, and of its subsumption under capital, the objectivity of value-positing, become autonomous, reflects back on the labour process as its 'truth'. At the very same time as being still in some sense nothing but the objective social expression of labour, value achieves dominance over labour; labour is reduced to a resource for capital accumulation. This contradiction in essence is a result of the fact that the whole relation of production is *inverted*, that the producers are dominated by their product (as value, capital) to the extent that they are reduced to servants of a production process originated and directed by

capital. Capital as value in motion is not distinct from matter in motion shifted by labour; labour acts *as* capital, not just at its behest. Marx says: “Labour is not only *the* use-value which confronts capital, it is *the use-value* of capital itself.”<sup>203</sup> This labour is absorbed by productive capital and acts as “*a moment of capital*”, he claims.<sup>204</sup> All the productive powers of labour appear as those of capital. The category of value is rooted precisely in capital’s struggle with labour to accomplish this ‘transfer’ of its productive powers.

Since the workers are ‘possessed’ by capital and the material labour process is simultaneously a valorisation process, the same thing has two frames of reference. But this is not merely a matter of different ways of talking, or of the coexistence of alternative realities, it is also a matter of *determination*, of one side informing the other with its own purposes. Capital determines the organisation of production: but the character of labour, natural resources and machinery limit it in this endeavour. Although capital is hegemonic in this respect,<sup>205</sup> its subsumption of labour can never be perfected; labour is always ‘in and against’ capital. Albeit that the production process is really subsumed by capital, the problem for capital is that it needs the *agency* of labour. Even if the productive power of labour is absorbed into that of capital to all intents, it is necessary to bear in mind that capital still depends upon it. [end]

Within this context we can understand better the question of whether fundamental is a problematic of unity/alienation/recovery or an ‘exterior’ ‘division in the beginning’.

Obviously there is an immediate opposition of class interests. However, this is a surface form of a deeper opposition-in-unity of Kapital and living Labor. It is this social form that assigns positions to classes. The

---

203 Grundrisse, p. 297.

204 Grundrisse, p. 364.

205 Grundrisse, p. 693.

class struggle is the form in which people become conscious of the inner contradiction and fight it out. As we have already shown, the capital/labour contradiction is premised on the insight that capital is the alienated power of the producers. In that sense the alienation problematic is more fundamental than the class struggle. However - and it is a big 'however' - once constituted the contradiction between capital and labour is powered mostly by the autonomous movement of capital (its law of motion cannot be reduced to a reflex response to workers struggles). Epochally capital is the 'principal moment' of the contradiction; so TC are quite right to read many of the post 1844 references to alienation as effects on workers of capital's self-constitution. But even the most rigorous 'capital-logic' is compatible with locating capital as a form within the historical phase of alienation in the larger sense.

A digression on the critique of work. I am baffled by TC's position. We could criticise 'taking exercise' as abstract. Surely we can do the same with the meaninglessness of work today? The more so if productive activity is taken to be a basic ontological dimension. TC counterpose to activity production relations but this is precisely about how we organise our productive activity. Of course a Marxist critique locates the problem as wage labour, not as industrial production, and still less on the basis the product just as an object exterior to its producer is subject to an alien destiny, the evaluation of others, etc. (Note: *On James Mill* for Marx on significance of work in socialism.) The extract claims 'alienated labour' has no dynamic implications. On the contrary, as 1968 showed, the revolt against such work will be the central motivation for revolution. And the aim is to organise relations of production that make work life-affirming rather than life-denying.

In my recent work I have gone to a lot of trouble to argue for the objective reality of inversion and fetishism. The whole epoch is objectively characterised by difference and division such that it is no illusion to say

that capital is the 'subject' confronting us. It has its own law of motion. It is inimical to our interests. it certainly cannot be reduced, Stirner-like, to a misrecognition of our own powers which we forgot we originated. Yet in the last analysis it is indeed a social form produced through our own activity, historically and daily. So I still think much of 1844 stands as a framing concept for the capitalist epoch. The philosophical difficulty is finding a middle way between saying, like Dussel, that 'all is labour' or fetishising capital as an exterior force that mugs us. The middle way depends upon understanding how what is 'nothing but' a social relation of production generates the objective real power over us because of inversion of subject and object.

This brings me to TC's incomprehension of the S/O dialectic here, and how the human essence appears as the inhuman power of capital. In my *Labour* book and also in my Brill book (p. 122) I go extensively into this. Given the separation of activity and object characteristic of capital v. labour, it is perfectly consistent to argue that the development of human powers is occurring in alienated form, and to speak of a recovery of the objective powers which simultaneously is the mending of the abstract subjectivity of the work-man (*Grundrisse*). It doesn't depend on a prior Golden Age, whether primitive communism or the pre-capitalist craftsperson. Of course if, as you argue, each side is estranged from the other, we have to suppose the whole relation is an alienated form of some other relation, which, if it isn't the Golden Age, must be in the future.

TC have difficulty with this 'speculation' of course.

Speculation. I can understand the alienation problematic is not explanatory in the sense TC would like. But it is a form of self-understanding, of grasping the nature of our predicament, of informing an historical project.

This brings me to the acute observations to end of the letter relating to 'what is at stake'; with its preference for 'immediate' 'finished forms'



of struggle, and its rejection of a view of class struggle as a mediating moment in a larger historical arc.

Let us begin from TC's own position that revolution occurs when the proletariat finds "its definition as a class to be an external constraint". Very good. We agree. But if revolution is *not* 'the affirmation ... of the proletariat' the question arises of what is it an affirmation? If, negatively, it abolishes class, what, *positively*, is it about? It can only be about human liberation. In that sense the class struggle is indeed a moment of a larger project, one in which non-proletarians have an interest since the very split into classes is an affront to human community. The proletariat is indeed the carrier of human destiny in its revolution and unlocks the riddle of history.

Before looking at the implication, let us clear up a couple of possible misunderstandings. TC claim our view substitutes for class struggle some other 'efficient contradiction' and that it prevents us seeing class struggle as what is "really productive of history". I do not know if 'efficient' means the same in French as in English philosophy. Here it refers to a causal impulse rather than reason for action. In that sense it is class struggle that produces change. But the 'need' for change is something else. In order to articulate it the speculative moment cannot be avoided. (I venture this with due trepidation!) Is it, as TC suggest, a teleological problematic? Certainly not if this means there is some *guarantee* inscribed in the heavens that communism will redeem us. What it does imply is that the meaning of an historical situation cannot be properly understood in its own terms but only from the standpoint of what it has in it to become. 'Another world is possible' is a speculative proposition, not because we do not have good arguments but in its logical status.

Let us return to Hegel's *Encyclopaedia*. There Hegel relates the speculative moment to the third phase of a dialectical movement, when a contradiction is reconceived, not as debilitating, but as productive. In what sense exactly speculative? How does speculative reason go beyond

ordinary understanding? Because it is creative. Unlike the nomological laws of mechanics, or laws of tendency extrapolating from the existent, it creates something *new* when it finds a way to surpass the contradiction. It requires ‘an upward spring of the mind’ to generate a new category, revolution to reorder society.

Looking backwards history must be written in the future anterior; such and such a contradiction will have its resolution in so and so. Looking forward, however, requires a wager on an unactual, perhaps utopian, goal, that communism will have been produced from class struggle. In order to articulate the revolutionary project the existent must therefore be grasped from the standpoint of the ‘not yet’. This creates the philosophical problems TC are worried about.

Let us return to the Theses on Feuerbach. “The standpoint of the new materialism is socialised humanity.” This standpoint is speculative; for there is no actuality to it. What is real is civil society (albeit we see it not as each against each but class against class). At best ‘socialised humanity’ exists in the mode of being denied, the asocial sociality of bourgeois society. The speculative moment emerges when reason demands the realisation of this standpoint in a practical project, to act as if this ‘not yet’ is actual.

The speculative moment cannot be eliminated precisely because we live in an alienated society in which the standpoint of socialised humanity is unactual, and hence available only in its displacement to philosophy which wagers on the proletariat to realise it.

Scientific socialism conceives itself as the theoretical expression of a revolutionary process which will put an end to philosophy in so far as it abolishes the alienating material relations that require such a detour through speculation. Marx’s project for ‘a unified science of man’ speculatively prefigures such a non-alienated society. But philosophy remains a reality as long as revolutionary practice lacks immediate historical actuality.

In sum the speculative moment is the leap forward. Dialectic is not a science of efficient causation allowing prediction. The future which will become has to be produced by 'us' and in anticipating it the speculative moment is unavoidable. The proletariat must enter into a self-transcending practice even if to begin with its self-assertion against capital is not yet understood in this way (See the problematic of Trotsky's 'transitional program') but we can theoretically anticipate the actuality of human liberation.